

ON DANGEROUS

GRO

THE HISTORY OF

DEATH



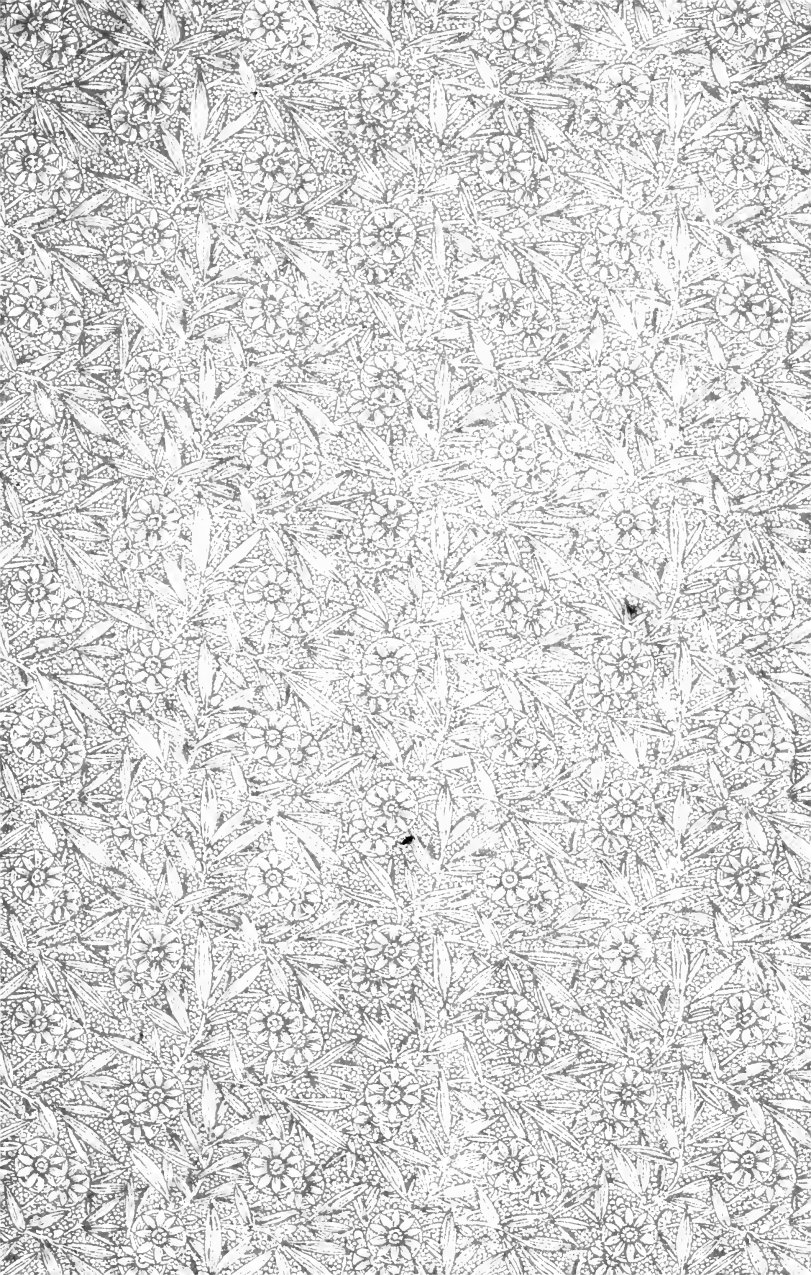


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ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

A NOVEL.

BY

EDITH STEWART DREWRY,

AUTHOR OF "A DEATH RING," "SWORN FOES," "BAPTISED
WITH A CURSE," "TWO FLOWERS," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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ON DANGEROUS GROUND.



CHAPTER I.

TWO FAVOURITES.

THERE are some people with whom, as they say in South America, you may “eat a barrel of salt” and not know them, or be less a stranger with them at the end than at the beginning; there are others *au contraire* to whom we are as unerringly drawn by some subtle *rappport*—some chord of sympathy on which a friendship ripens—often too with opposite natures which cannot count its growth

and strength by days or weeks. Such was the friendship between the two Nevilles and the two tenants of the west wing. Certainly a singular conjunction of circumstances had combined at the very outset of the acquaintance to break down and through all the usual barriers which must otherwise have stood for some time. And yet it would have been hard to find two women more dissimilar than Rose Neville and Gabrielle Albany. The one was an absolute embodiment of the words "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men,"—one of those rare beings from whom all evil and temptation seem literally to roll away like oil from water, to whom, indeed, that which to most others was temptation was none to her, simply because there was nothing in her that met it; she had the widest sympathies of truest philanthropy, deep clinging affections, patient, enduring love,—but none of those strong passions and masculine forces which were the very ebb and flow of that

other nature's tides. Neither could any sophistry deceive her, or casuistry blind her, for, though if there was any fallacious hole in it she might not perhaps be always able to intellectually pull it to pieces, her singularly intense moral rectitude would go straight through and through all the network to the right thing as unerringly as the carrier pigeon comes home; it was an instinct. You might puzzle her reason, perhaps, or mentally put her in a fog, but never morally. Many an intellect which dwarfed hers, many a schoolman steeped to the lips in erudition might have sat with advantage, morally—giving the word its widest scope—at the feet of this gentle Gamaliel. That was the elder woman; but the younger was the seething volcano, only with the outward calm and quiet of proud control—none within—fitted to battle with the stern world and a weight of trouble that would have simply laid Rose in her grave. She could not realise, understand,

such a base nature as was presented to her in that story of Leicester Albany, though she believed it as a fact, because the wife stood a living witness before her, but practically great wickedness was a myth to her comprehensiveness ; she had borne the sorrow that had come to her—and who is free?—with patient resignation ; the other her deadly wrongs with proud, stern endurance.

So, naturally, the more restful, calmer nature was soothing to the passionate, troubled soul of the other, and there it was the tie grew closer day by day.

“I’m so very glad you like Sister Rose so much, Gabrielle,” Douglas said one day, as she sat not far from him at his *secrétaire* writing.

Her pen had stopped, or he had not spoken. She looked up with the bright smile that came readily at his voice.

“She is so good,” she said, “and I never had a woman’s friendship before.”

“You would not easily pass the bounds

of society acquaintance," remarked Glen-Luna; "you are proud and reserved."

Gabrielle paused a moment, and then said quietly,—

"It has been my fault, if fault it is, to stand alone. I never made one friend amongst the girls at that miserable school. I was only just sixteen when I fled from them and married; then I was in the whirl of the gayest foreign society, and, amongst the women I met more intimately, there was none I cared for beyond mere liking. There was not one amongst us, I know, one quarter as good as Rose Neville."

"Except yourself," said Douglas quickly, almost impetuously.

Gabrielle Albany shook her head.

"No, I was only a girl, only mortal woman, not an angel or saint to walk unscathed in the flames. The fire burned me — certainly embittered, seared me — you know that as well as I do."

“You shall not force me to abandon my colours, Gabrielle. Perhaps I do know that, but no one can knock about, or be knocked about, in the world and be as unscathed—if a bitter life experience, and hardly bought worldly knowledge is necessarily being ‘scathed’—as those of a quieter mould both in nature and life. I declare,” he said, breaking into a half laugh, “if you are always going to compare yourself with Sister Rose, to your own detraction, I shall be compelled to hate her.”

“Then, you see, I should hate you, sir.”

“I am not the least bit afraid that you would even try,” said he, with all the contented impudence of security.

“I will tell you what, monsieur, I spoil you too much, and indulge you in your own way.”

“I don’t think I get that much from you, dear tyrant.”

“Quite as much as is good for you,

especially when you look so very wicked, as you do now."

"Do I? Did not your new riding-habit come down from town last night? The saddle I ordered has, I know—"

"Yes."

"Then, by the saints, I will at last have the pleasure of seeing you enjoy a ride again!" exclaimed Douglas. "Please do ring the bell, quick, dear Gabrielle, and we'll have out the open carriage and Hassan."

He saw her eyes sparkle as she obeyed, but, while he gave his orders to the servant who appeared, she finished her letter, closed it, and addressed it to Lady Glen-Luna, who had, in an effusive epistle, begged for news of her "darling boy." This happened to exactly suit her clever antagonist, and in a reply containing more easy, graceful phrases than information—for the gifted writer could be either as verbose and involved as Mr Gladstone, or

as terse as Latin, according to her will—she managed, while speaking of Douglas's health and the coming autumn, to convey to Adeline the decided impression that to bring down guests would be both distasteful and by no means the thing for her charge; all this, without even naming Dr Neville, or committing herself, couched in a cloud of flowing words, out of which Adeline would read—blinded, as Gabrielle well reckoned, by her own evil wishes and bent—that society would be bad for the chance of Douglas's improvement, and dear, generous Sir Arthur, read just the other way. The letter was a masterpiece of diplomatic policy.

She was not long in dressing, and perhaps no costume could have so perfectly set off her superb and picturesque beauty as the close-fitting habit and graceful cavalier hat. Douglas's own beautiful eyes gazed on her without any attempt to disguise his admiration.

“*Ma foi*,” said he, “Hassan’s beauty will be well matched!—you look simply superb—if you will forgive me for such an open compliment; you know I told you it was second nature, and I could not help saying pretty things. I’m incorrigible.”

“I am afraid you are.” She wheeled the chair up to the couch. “Are you ready, for Harford is at the lift, and the carriage at the door; lean on me.”

“I don’t think I shall ever reconcile myself to making a leaning-post of such a slight thing as you,” said Glen-Luna; “but you will scold me, I know, if I call Harford, so—”

He raised himself, laid one hand firmly, though not heavily, on her shoulder, and so, standing erect for one second, stepped into the chair, which Mrs Albany at once wheeled out into the corridor and into the lift, descending with him herself as usual. At the terrace steps stood the elegant open

carriage, in charge of Marston, while another groom held Harford's horse and his master's magnificent Arab, who testified his instant recognition of Douglas, the moment he appeared, by a delighted whinny and eager start forward for the accustomed caress.

"Dear old Hassan," said Douglas, as the beautiful animal gently pushed his nose into his hand and against his shoulder, "you must be a jewel to-day, for you have to carry a lady. Oh! you know her again! Of course you do. Marston, has he been out this morning?"

"Yes, sir; but still I think that Mrs Albany will have to give him a good stretch."

Harford now assisted his master into the carriage, and then turned to mount his mistress, as he considered and called Gabrielle. It was almost amusing to see the absolute ease with which the powerful man just put his two hands on her waist and

swung her into the saddle. Douglas fairly laughed as the courier mounted.

“Harford makes no more of your weight, Mrs Albany, than if you were a kitten. Would you mind if we go over to Langbourne, to the old farrier, and see if my other four-footed favourite is ready to come home? I want to introduce you to Angus.”

“I should like it very much,” answered Gabrielle. “Let go Hassan’s head, please, James.”

The noble, wild-spirited Arab, who had been impatiently tossing his handsome head and performing a dance of his own invention, sprang forwards with a bound, which the rider’s strong hand instantly checked, and reined him back to the side of the carriage, that she might talk to Douglas.

“Hassan cannot have his way yet,” he said, “though, like the rest of us, he likes to get it when he can. I wonder why everything that has life is fond of following its own sweet will, and *foi de mon âme!*”

said he, vigorously. "How detestable it is to have one's own will seriously crossed!"

"I don't think yours has had much of that," said Gabrielle, with a quizzical glance that made him laugh.

"There! Go and race off your wickedness and Hassan's wildness over that splendid upland. I want to see you to advantage."

"*Vraiment!* Off then, dear Hassan!"

Horse and rider were off over the turf at a speed which must have unseated any but a very perfect rider.

Douglas watched him intently, and a cloud passed over the bright beauty of his face—a passionate sweep of bitterest agony, the maddening feeling with which the young, strong eagle, chained to the beetling rock, might watch the circling flight of his free brethren.

He leaned back, setting the small, white teeth, clenching the chiselled hands for a moment; but, ah! me—was that all? Was there no other deeper, if unacknowledged,

pain in the depth of that wild heart, as she came back to him, with slightly flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, so dazzling in her glorious beauty and youth that he almost held his breath before he spoke, though, in her mere presence, the cloud passed.

“You look ripe for another helter-skelter race,” he said. “Go off again. Nay! you shall not stop for me; your pleasure is mine!”

“And mine, just now,” she answered brightly, “is to ride here and talk to you, and perhaps, if your canine pet is ready to return with us, I’ll ride a race with him for your edification. Is Langbourne far?”

“Three miles from Doring, down river.”

“We shall not be long, then?”

“I wish it were three times as far,” said Glen-Luna, with a wicked glance that pointed the compliment. “Marston! take the road skirting the river banks, Mrs

Albany is as fond of the sight of water as I am."

Marston touched his hat, and, after leaving the park, turned to the river as desired, but the distance proved to be only a half-hour's drive, or else, as Douglas declared, "pleasant company made time take wings."

"There is old Dick Hurdle's place, sir," said Marston, pulling up his horses before the yard gate of an old, straggling, red-brick cottage, which a huge board above the porch announced to belong to "Richard Hurdle, farrier."

"He does not seem to be busy," said Harford, throwing his bridle over the gatepost and dismounting; but they had been both heard and seen, for a girl about twelve ran out of the door into the back-yard, calling out, "Grandfather! come, quick, and bring Angus! Here's the young master, and a beautiful lady on his own horse!"

The next moment there was just a glimpse of an old man round the corner, and of a

magnificent young collie dog of the largest breed; then an absolute, almost human shriek of joy, a sudden rush like an avalanche, and the dog had dashed through the open gates and leaped with one bound into the carriage, his paws on his master's breast, licking him all over, whining, quivering with such frantic joy and excitement that it was some time before even the beloved hand and voice could at all calm the poor animal.

"Now, Angus, dear old boy! Yes, I know well how you love your master, but go and speak to Harford and make acquaintance with your mistress."

Down leaped Angus, jumped delightedly on Harford, pranced round his Arab friend, and bounced up to Gabrielle, licking the caressing hand she stretched to him, whining joyfully at the sweet voice that addressed him.

"You noble beauty! You dear boy! Oh, Mr Douglas, can't we take him back with us?—his foot must be well?"

“It’s quite well now, ma’am, bless ye,” said old Dick, now coming forwards, “I was a-going to send him home this evening, sir, but, of course, now you’ll take him yourself; ’specially as the young lady wants him. How’s the rest o’ the family, sir?”

“Thanks, Dick, they’re all well, and my father asked after you, in his last letter wasn’t it, Mrs Albany?”

“Yes; two days ago.”

“Lord bless him! How good of him, now, to think of old Dick, the farrier,” said the delighted old man, “please, sir, to give him my humblest duty, and tell him how proud I am he should think of me.”

“I’ll write on purpose to tell him, Dick,” returned the young master, “good-bye.”

And the cavalcade swept off, carriage, riders, and the dog bounding on before; but presently, in a narrow lane, as the two riders were alongside behind the carriage, Harford bent towards Gabrielle, and said, in a low voice,—

“That dog is as wise as we are, Mrs Albany. He cannot bear a certain person, coax him as she will; Angus never will speak to her.”

“I suppose not,” said the other dryly, “he loves his master too well to be deceived.”

The courier glanced ahead, and then asked, in the same undertone,—

“Do you think, madam, that she will bring down guests?”

Mrs Albany looked up straight into his face, with a soft little odd laugh.

“I have written to her, Harford, and made the game sure.”

“You are as clever as you are daring, Mrs Albany; you know how to tread both fearlessly and warily on dangerous ground.”

Ay, for his sake; but oh for the poor, brave heart that still was but human.

Heaven help her! *There* the ground was crumbling away from under her, day by day, and hour by hour.



CHAPTER II.

“A DIAMOND WILL CUT GLASS.”

ITA scribatur ut etiamsi literæ in ejus manus incederint offendi non possint” is a maxim, and, broadly interpreted, a very wise maxim, of the Jesuits ; and Gabrielle Albany had taken its worldly wisdom to heart early enough in her troubled life. She had only put it into force once more in that letter which, speeding its way through many hands, reached its destination the next morning, and was found on her plate by Lady Glen-Luna when she entered the breakfast-room, the first one down.

“Mrs Albany’s writing,” she muttered,

with a sort of little purr to herself, like a cat who has, or thinks she has, caught a mouse. "What a beautiful hand it is, though more like a man's than a woman's. Now, let us see what are her news of her charge. Driving him out, I suppose, with those blood-horses. Very daring of her; they might bolt and kill them both."

She opened the letter and read it. How thin and sinister her lips looked now, and how coldly steel grey her eyes under the arched brows. She puckered them up with a somewhat puzzled look, which, however, gave place to a sleek, complacent smile as she read the letter through again, this time slowly, as if weighing every word; then sat with it in her hand cogitating.

"Yes!" she muttered. "I see exactly what she really means and wants. She is far too high-bred to wish or attempt to dictate to me what is best for her charge; but still it is quite clear to me

that she wishes me, and me alone, to read between the lines, and understand that guests at Luna would fret Douglas very seriously. *Au même temps*, Madame Gabrielle, you have been a leetle *too* clever, for your hint is so delicately veiled, the whole so involved, that anyone might perfectly well understand it quite the other way (as I shall certainly choose to do), or be in a fog as to what you *do* mean. Chère madame, you are already—ha! ha!—so deeply anxious for his interests and fancies that you are too clever by half. *I* see fast enough; but I can and shall make of this letter what I like, so that you wont suspect me more than you do now. I'll fill the house with guests, Lees and all, if Arthur likes. I'm not afraid of Hyacinth one bit now; *she* will never be able to rival la magnifique Albany." To whose clever wire-pulling she was so completely and blindly dancing.

My lady! my lady! If you wish to

succeed in outdoing Gabrielle Albany, you will have to do it by some *coup-de-main*! Outwit her you never will; for she, at least, knows where the serpent is, if she cannot always foresee its next blow. But you, in blind serenity, deem you have a dupe, where you have the most suspicious, most wary, and relentless of antagonists. Which, then, is treading on the most dangerous ground—you, or the noble-hearted woman whom, with such ruthless, calculating cruelty to both of them, you have flung at Douglas Glen-Luna's feet?

Steps and voices outside the door, and Sir Arthur and Jessie came in together.

"Letters, my dear?" said the baronet. "Is that from Douglas? Ah! no. I see it is Mrs Albany's writing; but I suppose it is all about him."

"Yes, dear. I asked her to let me know how they got on, and what they did to pass the time. Read it, both of you, and tell me your impression. Mine

is that she fancies it is rather a mistake of us to yield to the dear boy's natural shrinking from having guests down."

Sir Arthur read the letter, Jessie peeping over his shoulder, while Lady Glen-Luna rang for breakfast.

"Well, what think you of it, Arthur?" she said, in her pretty, bright way, "if it won't harm him."

"The letter gives me that impression entirely, my dear, as much as it says anything, and, of course, last year he was still too ill to bear anything."

"Oh, papa!" exclaimed Jessie, eagerly, "I'm sure it can't hurt him now if we had fifty guests! It wouldn't interfere with him. He's got all the west wing and Mrs Albany all to himself! What more can he want?"

"Hush! my love," said her mother, reprovingly, "it is not what he wants, for he is too unselfish to 'want' anything himself, but what is best for him; we must take care

of him. It is a load of anxiety off my mind that we have providentially secured such a devoted attendant as dear Mrs Albany."

You see this woman was too clever to show her darkest cards, even to the daughter for whom she schemed.

Sir Arthur, tapping an egg, smiled and asked,—

"Whom, then, you soft-hearted little woman, did you think of asking down?"

"Well, dear, I had hardly thought of it yet; but, of course, I know, for instance, you would like your old friend's widow and daughter, the Lees, asked, and some sportsmen—Sir George Saltoun and his son, wife, and daughter, and, well, I should like to ask Mr Brandon, too, as some slight return for really saving darling Jessie's life."

"Capital!" exclaimed Sir Arthur; "he's a most agreeable man, and would enjoy the shooting immensely. But then, my dear, it seems to me that you will have an over-

balance of one sex. You'll want more young ladies."

Adeline laughed, and began tallying off on her fingers as merrily as a girl.

"I don't think so. We shall have, then, Percy Rosslyn, young Saltoun, and Clifford Brandon. Against that we have Jessie here, Hyacinth Lee, and Julia Saltoun, the elders making up the party."

"And a very nice party, too; only Adie, we must try and get handsome Mrs Albany to 'show' a little you know."


"Oh, my dear," returned the little lady, with a good-natured laugh, "we shall not get her to desert Douglas, depend upon it! And he certainly won't leave the west wing, or allow it to be invaded."

In the latter she was right enough; in the former assertion she was doomed to disappointment and vexation of spirit.

But lest some letter should arrive to change Sir Arthur's amenable reading of the one received, my lady determined to

put the matter beyond recall that same day by securing the proposed guests, especially Clifford Brandon, who she saw was entirely *épris* with Jessie, and to whom, as he was rich (that was beyond doubt), well born, and the most *charming* creature, she had no objection if Jessie liked him.

“Certainly,” she mused, as she dressed for her calls, “I should have preferred a title, and perhaps a younger man, but really there are just now no titles and money together that I could secure for her, and if—if—I—fail,” she was drawing on her lemon kids now, “I do not want her to flirt through another season or two ; men get tired of a girl then ; she is *passé*, I think she can hold her own against Hyacinth Lee ; besides, though she can flirt, she is, I’m certain, in love with Douglas, or why didn’t she accept other offers ? And then, come worse to worse, I could I think, pit Mrs Leicester Albany against her. Heaven ! If that woman was only unmarried, how dangerous she would



be. But you see"—she was apparently addressing this salve to her own conscience—if she had such an inconvenient article—"I was forced to some such step, for I could not have again avoided the Lees being asked, and the girl would probably have won Douglas. *Now*, of course, there is no fear. Certainly in Gabrielle Albany my good fortune has played me her trump card."

And down to the carriage tripped that "sweet little Lady Glen-Luna." What a *masque* we move in !

Ill deeds will rise,
Though all the world o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

Glass is very hard and sharp, but we all know that a diamond will cut it.





CHAPTER III.

HYDRA.

“**N**OW, really, my dear Mrs Orde, *do* just look, upon my word ! and they’ve stopped again at those Nevilles’ !”

Tableau ! Mrs Winstanley and Mrs Doctor Orde staring from the former’s window opposite Cedar Lodge, on the scandalous sight presented one day by the stopping of Douglas Glen-Luna’s elegant open carriage, with himself in it, Gabrielle mounted on the beautiful Arab, who certainly put his daring rider’s strength and skill to the test sometimes ; and the noble collie, Angus, leaping in high spirits from one to the other.

“ I believe she is just an artful, designing widow, after all,” added Mrs Winstanley, “ and has thoroughly deceived that sweet, innocent Lady Glen-Luna.”

“ Widow, indeed, my dear !” said Mrs Orde, who never forgave Mrs Albany for sending for the London physician instead of her husband. “ I really wonder if she ever was anybody’s wife at all, to begin with. Of course, she knows she’s very handsome and looks superb on that Arab, which nobody ever rode but him before *she* must needs choose to treat his favourite horses as if they were her own—ugh ! I hate those fast, impudent foreign women. I think Lady Glen-Luna must be mad to have her at all, and those Nevilles must be *very queer* people”—these ladies dealt largely in italics—“ to be so intimate already; just listen now, she’s actually calling to Miss Neville in the garden.”

A terrible crime certainly, and only made the scandal worse for that beautiful woman

to wheel her impatient, restless horse, close to the pretty gate, and call, in her rich, mellow tones,—

“ Sister Rose ! here we are, leave your pets a minute.”

For there was sweet Sister Rose in her garden, with a broad brown “ basin ” hat, and large apron on, and gardening gloves, and big scissors in her hand, cutting, trimming, petting her flowers, as if they were alive. At the sound of wheels, and that voice, she lifted herself erect, threw down scissors and pruning-knife, and, with her sunny smile, came quickly down to the gate, pulling off her bemoulded gloves.

“ How good of you both to stop,” she said, clasping Mrs Albany’s hand, and nodded brightly to Douglas—“ You too, Angus,” as the collie jumped forepaws upon the gate, eager for a caress. “ Where have you taken her to-day, Mr Douglas ? ”

“ Faith, I can hardly tell you Sister Rose, or Gabrielle either, for Marston or Harford

are generally our guides, but we have been some fifteen or twenty miles, I believe, eh, Harford ?”

“ Quite that, sir.”

“ And yesterday,” added Glen-Luna, “ we spent the day from nine o’clock till ten at night on the steam-launch ; we ran down to Cliveden, which Gabrielle had never seen.”

“ That was delightful,” said Rose ; “ you are taking the best advantage of the fine weather.”

“ Of which,” laughed Douglas, “ we get such scanty allowance in England.”

“ Poor England ! ” Sister Rose shook her head ; “ you and Gabrielle are always abusing the climate.”

“ It only deserves abuse,” said he, with a wicked, defiant glance ; “ do you know we, Gabrielle and I, call the sun ‘ the English stranger ? ’ ”

“ You are a very bad, ungrateful fellow then, and she’s as bad,” retorted Sister Rose, merrily ; “ you are both spoiled by being so

much abroad. Have you heard from town since you wrote, my dear?" this to Mrs Albany.

"Only a few lines, but I daresay we shall have a letter soon, this evening, perhaps. So, Hassan, be quiet; you are so restless, boy."

"Like his master," muttered Douglas, under his moustache; but she heard him, and the shadow that lay in her dark eyes deepened. His suffering stabbed her. She reined Hassan in closer as Miss Neville spoke.

"I suppose, Mr Douglas, when your people return home, they will bring a houseful of guests with them, or after them?"

Glen - Luna shivered, but answered quietly,—

"Perhaps they will, and I suppose that I shall have to obey my tyrant there. Shall we see you again soon, Sister Rose?"

"I think you must be tired of me—"

"Of *you*! Oh, no; how dare you hint

such a thing? You don't deserve any music for a month; so *addio* till you come."

So they took leave and were off again, the Arab tossing his head and bounding forwards in a manner that did not look as if twenty miles had given him much taste for his stable, or any idea that his rider's firm hand might possibly be tired.

"There they go," commented Mrs Winstanley; "dear me! How can people be so blind? I dare say he's a perfect slave to every caprice. I don't know what the world is coming to, I'm sure."

"I hope he didn't see us, my dear?" said Mrs Orde, in some alarm; "I saw him, as they drove off, glance this way, and then evidently say something to that creature, for she laughed. Ugh! I don't believe the woman cares one stone what all Doring may say of her. But her proud scorn will have a fall yet, take my word for it, my dear."

How very Christian we do feel over the contemplated judgment so richly deserved

by some especially inimical sinner. I am quite certain that if you could have played the *rôle* of Le Diable Boiteu that night, you would have found Mrs Doctor Orde in a state of fierce righteousness reading the 69th Psalm, and thanking God that she was not as other men, or women !

I really wonder if the ancients symbolised scandal by the story of the Hydra. That masterly thinker, Lord Bacon, finds a profound and subtle depth of meaning in most of the classic creeds and legends, in which the majority of minds read only a graceful fable, or at most a surface allegory. Now, I humbly submit, is it fair to those same wondrous classics of Greece and Rome, who are, after all, the corner-stone of civilisation, to say that Bacon's great intellect infused its own wisdom into the ancient lore, and gave to it a profundity of which its authors never dreamed ; rather is it that it takes a great mind to thoroughly read a great mind.

“Two of the Hydra's heads up there,”

Douglas had said in French, “gossiping our heads off, I’ll swear.”

At which Albany’s wife laughed in scornful amusement and haughty disdain. She had felt the sharp sting of the scorpion itself, and this country town snapping was a mere shadow of the reality. She knew well that “they talked her head off,” for scandal reaches us like the air we breathe. Did not the very corn spring up and wave out the news that King Midas had got ass’s ears? It might distress Rose Neville to know how those village coteries overhauled the doings and inmates of the Hall, but the one it most touched cared nothing. She had higher, dearer interests at heart, and nothing could shake her hold of the standard she had grasped in her firm right hand.

That evening’s post brought several letters, two of which were for Gabrielle,—one from Lady Glen-Luna, the other she saw was from good little Mrs May.

“Dear Mrs Albany and Douglas,” began

Adeline, "I send you a joint epistle, with full account of our doings and plans. I suppose you will spoil my dear boy by reading this aloud while he lies in an atmosphere of flowers."

"*Ma foi*, not so far out, is she!" said Douglas, lazily, one arm under his head as he lay at full length, after so long a drive in a more upright position; "it is not every fellow who has the luck to have such a reader either, for

‘Like music on the waters
Is thy sweet voice to me.’”

"I wonder if you, Sir Knight, could speak twenty sentences to a woman without tripping off a flowery compliment?"

"Of course not," said he, coolly, opening his great grey eyes wide with the most wicked look. "I warned you, my dear Gabrielle, that I should have to make all the pretty speeches to you, as there was no one else, and you gave me leave—"

“*Tres bien, monsieur*, but you will have others soon to divide favours with me.”

“I don’t want any others,” he said, with a quickness that made her smile, though a faint colour had crossed her cheek.

“Do you know that you said that so like a child who hurriedly asserts he is quite well the moment mamma talks of physic, that I cannot help laughing.”

“Laugh away, sweet Gabrielle, but it *is* physic, for all your sweet coaxing me that it is only *le premier pas qui coute*. Still, if you bade me take poison I should do it.”

“*Vraiment!* I shall not, I hope, put your knightly chivalry to quite such a severe test. Perhaps you will listen now with due respect to your belle-mère’s epistle.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, fair dame. I am all attention. I suppose that little arrant coquette of a sister of mine is flirting no end with her new beau, Clifford Brandon.”

"I dare say," was the serene reply. "I see his name." Which came in pretty soon amongst the guests whom the writer said she had asked for the autumn. "Also Lady Constance Lee, and lovely Hyacinth, whom you, dear boy, used to admire so much."

"Of course I did," remarked the "dear boy," playing with his soft moustache, and his glance still resting, under the long, heavy lashes, on the beautiful face before him. "She was lovely enough to be admired, and charming enough to flirt with. We were the best of friends, but—I don't care to see her here now."

"*Fie donc, fie donc, mon ami!*" said voice and uplifted finger; but he laughed.

"I don't, scold me as you like."

"You know you deserve it, just for your wicked look of rebellion. Listen to the rest of the letter, sir, if you please."

"I'm all attention, madame."

So he was. The remainder had a good

deal to say about Mr Brandon, in praise. He was handsome, very well born and connected, and rich—”

“And,” supplemented the incorrigible Douglas, “the belle-mère thinks he’s quite a good *parti* for Jessie. I wonder who or what on earth this Clifford Brandon is!” he said, with a slight change of manner. “I never heard such a name in society. The Rosslyns should know certainly, but, still—well, we shall see.”

He moved restlessly, and Gabrielle said quietly,—

“You must not fret yourself about Jessie or her possible suitor. Her mother surely loves *her* at least, and will be careful.”

“She ought to; I suppose it’s all right.”

Still he was disturbed, she saw, and quietly putting Mrs May’s letter into her pocket, went to the piano to charm away anxiety with Mendelssohn and Schumann.



CHAPTER IV.

MARIUS.

WHEN Gabrielle Albany was alone in her room that night she opened Mrs May's letter, which began by apologising for not having written a month ago, when the man came, and then went on to tell her in a very fairly-worded detail about the visit of the stranger, not omitting the final fillip, "that she believed he was nothing better than Mrs Albany's scamp of a husband." The little woman described him, too, very tolerably, for a person of her class; for the uneducated especially fail in the capability of description. "He was handsome-like, very dark-

ishly disposed, with only a thick moustache, and tall, with figure according."

Gabrielle dropped the letter, and sat with her head resting on her hands, dumb, motionless, with a strange, dim sense of darkness creeping over her, such as one feels in a dream, which she could not at first define, or lay hold of, or combat.

Why, in Heaven's name, did Leicester want to know where she was? Was the foul lie he told Mrs May the beginning, the foundation-stone, of a whole scheme? Did he mean to actually make a desperate attempt to shake off the marriage by the aid of an appeal to law, which he must know would be futile, or did he only want to make sure she was well out of his way—abroad, perhaps—before he attempted to put into execution the plans she was sure he had formed, and which she had warned him she would foil, at whatever cost to herself?

To herself—but what if he found her out

here, and drove her away, made them believe that she was a wife who had indeed broken every vow, and flung honour and womanhood from her. Ah me ! Why at the thought does she draw such a sudden sharp breath, and press both those slender hands on her bosom ; will that still the wild throbs of the poor passionate heart that has passed so insidiously, so completely out of her keeping or control ; or crush out such fierce agony as even she in all her miserable life has never known till now. She cannot, does not even try to deceive herself, but faces the bitter, terrible truth, as she has done every other danger in her gloomy path ; she has known it vaguely before this, but still, like death, it comes suddenly after all. She was only a woman, a passionate, noble, loving woman, whose full immeasurable power of love had never been touched or reached till now ; till this Douglas, gifted with every gift that wins, surrounded with every circumstance that must perforce ap-

peal at once to her deepest, tenderest sympathy ; thrown even more absolutely lately on her care, dependent on her for his hope of recovery, even for the safety of his life she knew. She had been less, or more, than human to resist the sweeping tide that had set in with such terrible force against her. Wring the white hands in passionate, voiceless agony ; cover the deathlike face in bitterest shame and woe, for she knows now that, fight the cruel battle outwardly as she may, her very heart has betrayed her at last ; that she, proud woman, who never loved before, wedded wife, God help her ! loves Douglas Glen-Luna with all the force and deathless faith of her strong impassioned soul. It is too late to crush it under foot, she is single-handed, weighted too cruelly in the self-conflict, for there is not, cannot be, the least moral power to aid her in such a terrible marriage as that which binds her to such a man as Leicester Albany, who had

sold her honour for gold, and held it lightly indeed almost from the day he wedded her, a child scarcely sixteen. She cannot, will not, fly the hourly misery in which there lies too unconsciously such a dangerous, wild happiness.

“No,” she mutters with stern self-sacrifice; “come what may I will never leave him as long as I am necessary. What matters that I suffer! I can dare all, bear all, for thee, Douglas—my heart, my one only love! Oh my God! is this sin? How could I help it! how could I help it! Help me in this battle!”

The poor heart’s cry of more than mortal agony! this wild prayer of the pure, loyal woman’s very soul that shrank in terror and horror from the mere shadow of sin and dishonour.

Still self-suppression, guard, control, the watchwords of her troubled, tempest-tossed, most sorrowful life, scarcely yet counting twenty-five years, with all the dreary waste

of heart-broken years stretching away in darkness before her, only the wrecks of what should have been home and happiness around her, like Marius amongst the desolate ruins of Carthage; yet still in all, through all, this grand, high-souled woman never dreamed of surrender to her own heart, never, coward-like, asked for one moment for death to end her misery, but only prayed for strength to still struggle against the tide, power to endure unto the end in purity as untainted in heart as in deed.

And surely, oh surely, we know that such a cry God heareth; such prayers God answereth.





CHAPTER V.

OVER THEIR FIVE O'CLOCK.

TWO fair girls lounging "at ease" over their five o'clock, sipping tea out of the tiniest, most dainty pieces of Sèvres that could be distinguished by the name of cups at all, the hat and gloves of one lying on a spider-like chair near her; the other, evidently hostess, lazily balancing herself, chair and all, as her glance went round the elegant boudoir.

"So Jessie," she said, "we are to be amongst your autumn guests this year, my mammy says; how very jolly!"

"You are coming, then; you have

accepted mamma's invitation?" exclaimed Jessie Glen-Luna.

"Accepted," repeated Hyacinth Lee, opening wide her very blue eyes, that had in truth given her her name, "of course we have, my dear. Who else are coming, Jessie?"

"Let me see, not such a very large party, because mamma says it might be too much for Douglas, though I don't suppose that he and his own people will be seen beyond the west wing."

Hyacinth stifled a sigh behind her handkerchief, and repeated lazily,—

"His *own* people."

"Yes, of course; he has everything exactly as he likes. He has the west wing entirely, and his own servants, and Harford—you remember his courier?—and lately his secretary, and of course always his own carriages and horses."

"And won't his secretary sometimes make his appearance?" asked Hyacinth, replenishing her cup.

“ He’s a *she*,” cried Jessie, bursting into a merry laugh—“ a married lady.”

“ Oh ”—Miss Hyacinth’s eyes opened wide—“ poor fellow ! is he consigned to the care of some old frump who wears tight caps and bonnets of the year 1 ? I’m certain he couldn’t endure such a creature about him.”

Jessie nearly choked with laughter at the absolute opposite this picture was to the original, but it instantly popped into her head that there might perhaps be some fun got out of it, if she kept up the hoax Hyacinth had in fact put upon herself, so she said, still laughing,—

“ Well, I dare say he’d prefer a stylish, handsome woman of four or five and twenty as a companion and sort of nurse when he’s ill ; but still he and madame are capital friends, bonnets and all included. If he didn’t like her, he could send her away.”

“ But you said ‘ married,’ ” said Hyacinth, a little puzzled by Jessie’s manner ; “ where is this Madame Frump’s husband ? ”

“ Oh, she’s separated, of course ; treated her like a brute, and so she left him somewhere in California and got a legal separation. Mamma found the whole report of the case in an old paper some while ago. Then you’ll see her, I dare say, when you come. You asked who else ? ” rattled Jessie, afraid that her face would betray some joke if she did not shelve off the dangerous ground. “ Well, first and foremost, the Saltouns.”

“ All four ? ”

“ Yes, they’re all jolly ; and Fred Saltoun is such a lady’s man. Then there’s Percy Rosslyn.”

“ Pretty dear,” put in Hyacinth, her nose in the air ; “ dances well, though not within twenty degrees of what your poor brother used to do. Well, who else, dear ? ”

“ Oh, why, Mr Brandon,” returned Jessie, with slightly heightened colour, and the true coquette’s little toss of the head.

Hyacinth’s eyes twinkled.

"Of course," said she, "he'll be in the seventh heaven. Really, it was quite a romantic meeting. I'm so sick of being introduced to people! Aren't you, Jessie?"

Jessie nodded. She liked handsome, dashing Clifford Brandon to be considered the captive of her bow and spear. Certainly his attentions to her had been sufficiently marked to entitle the little flirt to consider him so. I am afraid she was too like her mother to be much in love with anybody, certainly not beyond a "limited liability" sort of way that would not be very heart-breaking.

"And then," she added, "there are some capital people about, and even in Doring. There is Douglas's physician who was called in when the lift broke—Dr Neville, a London man—and his sister."

"Oh, oh," said Miss Hyacinth, significantly,—“young, is she?”

"Only fifty, my dear. Oh, Douglas couldn't flirt with her."

Hyacinth laughed.

"I think my mammy is quite right," said she; "it's high time you and I got married and settled down. I think you'll be the first to set an example, my dear. I'll ask Madame Frump's advice when I see her."

"Hem!" said Jessie, sagely, "I don't think she would advise people to marry at all. Her own experience has been about the worst I ever heard of. Why, her wretch of a husband, actually in—California—sold her—gambled her away to a fellow, and she shot him and escaped. We read it in the old paper."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Hyacinth, almost incredulous; "but she must surely, then, have been pretty when she was young?"

"I suppose so," Jessie's lip gave again, and she rose; "but anyhow, whichever of us two marries first, the other must be bridesmaid."

"All right. Must you go? Good-bye.

Don't give Clifford Brandon more than three round dances to-night, now."

And so jesting, the two parted. Neither cared especially for the other, but Jessie wanted some one to take Saltoun off her hands. Hyacinth, however, had her own bit of fun in view.





CHAPTER VI.

THE FANCY AND THE REALITY.

AS the florist tends and watches the rarest, tenderest, most beautiful of his flowers, so Chandos Neville watched and tended his most precious charge day by day, as the time glided by and the end of July came near—watched with an anxiety only surpassed by that of the woman who loved Douglas Glen-Luna. Under their hands he progressed steadily, if slowly, and with some fluctuations, but clever Dr Neville had never in his life been more right than when he set such absolutely unmeasured store by the tireless care and limitless influence of

the grand-hearted woman without whose hourly and intimate mental as well as physical co-operation, the physician still openly said, his own work would have been a very hopeless struggle against head wind and strong tide. As it was, he now affirmed with quiet confidence that not only was his charge gaining strength and that vitality on which so much depended, but he, the physician, was slowly and surely mastering the very core of the actual injury done. As to Harford, he told Mrs Albany flat that his master was quite another being since she had come.

"Only," he added anxiously, and with his characteristic respectful familiarity, "we shall have to be very careful that my lady does not find that out, Mrs Albany, or she will try to get rid of you."

Gabrielle Albany looked straight into the man's eyes, and said quietly—

"I think, Harford, that that is beyond her power now."

Harford had paused at the open door of her sitting-room, near the middle table of which she stood. He came right inside the room, and said between his teeth,—

“Pardon me, do you think you quite know what a little devil she is?”

“I think I do, Harford.”

“Ay, Mrs Albany, but I mean—do you know that she would use the weapons which only such a woman can use against a woman placed as you are here—weapons from which even you might well shrink and give way?”

The blood flushed over her very brow for a moment, knowing so well what he meant; it was the tribute sensitive womanhood wrung from the noble strength that could endure, suffer, dare all, all for Douglas's sake; but she laid her firm hand, that scarcely looked as if it could give such an iron grasp, on his arm, and said slowly,—

“I might, perhaps, shrink; I am a

woman, but before Heaven I swear I will never give way. If you knew all I have gone through, all I have suffered and dared, you would not fear my failing now for one moment."

"You are a noble woman, Mrs Albany."

There was dead silence for a minute, then Harford said, with a deep-drawn breath,—

"So they are really coming down on Thursday, Mrs Albany?"

"Yes; and the first of the guests on Saturday, Lady Constance and Miss Lee."

"Miss Lee—here!" said the courier quickly and suspiciously; "what can be Lady Glen-Luna's motive? She used to be frightened to death that the master would marry Miss Hyacinth Lee; I know she was. I saw through her fast enough, and so did Mr Douglas. She thinks the danger is past, I suppose, though there never was any, I fancy. Mrs Albany, when all these people come, do you and

Dr Neville mean the master to go down amongst them actually, or—”

“Yes, Harford, sometimes, drive with them when there is a party going, be in the *salon* in the evening, and so on.”

“But not without you,” said Harford, eagerly ; “not unless you are with him?”

Gabrielle looked up and smiled.

“No, I shall be with him—in his carriage—in the room. One feels the moment she is in the house again as if one must be on guard at every point, and suspect her every movement.”

“That’s exactly my feeling, Mrs Albany. I wish to Heaven we could take him abroad.”

Mrs Albany shook her head.

“He is not strong enough to bear the journey now. The inevitable fatigue and jolting would be ruinous at present. In another two months, or perhaps even less, it might be possible, but not now.”

“Well, of course, madam, you and the

doctor know best, but I wish she would take into her head to go abroad, only I don't think Sir Arthur would go for long."

And with that wish Harford withdrew.

There was another very strong wish in the man's heart which he could not utter.

On the Thursday evening the family came down, and you may be sure that the Doring coteries had plenty to gossip about over their Friday five o'clocks, how they all looked, what they had done, whether they would "show" at the archery meeting, the cricket match, the rifle contest at the new butts, how Lady Glen-Luna had driven through the town and looked as charming as ever, and how, of course, that fast Mrs Albany wouldn't be able to have it all quite so much her own way, and those Nevilles would find *they* couldn't either; all of which floated to the ears of "those Nevilles," and highly amused them.

"Poor Mrs Albany's great offence," said the doctor laughing, "appearing to be her

beauty and graceful *aire de grande duchesse*, and the fact that she drives Mr Glen-Luna's *own* favourite horses, rides his own Arabian, and comes to church in his own park phaeton attended by his own groom. Ugh, the spiteful toads! it's nothing but jealousy"—to which Sister Rose fully agreed—of course, if Gabrielle were to care or fret herself about these stupid people she had better throw up her situation at once, because the very essence of it was to be the constant attendant and companion of Sir Arthur's son.

The Lees arrived in time for dinner on the Saturday, and Jessie, who, as there was no one yet to flirt with, thought she might as well see the end of her joke, begged her mother—whom she had primed—to send and ask Mrs Albany to come down that evening. But Miss Jessie was doomed not to see the result of her joke so soon, for Mrs Albany sent back her compliments, but she was sorry to say Mr Glen-Luna was not

quite so well this evening, and she could not leave him. A message and fact of which Mr Glen-Luna himself was happily ignorant, and which Lady Glen-Luna received from Harford with a sigh, and sadly breathed,—

“My poor boy”—that made the courier retire biting his lip, half angry, half amused, at the hypocrisy that was to him so thin a veil.

The little party in the drawing-room broke up early, for Lady Constance and Hyacinth were both tired and were glad to retire to their rooms. To inquiries about Douglas, Adeline only said he was much the same, never had seen any one since his accident, and she did not think he would be induced to do so now ; certainly not yet awhile.

Lovely Hyacinth Lee was the first in the breakfast-room the next morning, and, as no one was there, and the open French window and beautiful grounds without

looked too tempting to be resisted, the girl threw up her pretty head to catch the breeze, laden with the sweet scent of flowers and river air, and ran out over the lawn towards the belt of rich wooding that lay beyond, till suddenly she was brought up all standing, with a little half-startled cry, by an immense collie dog bouncing excitedly about her, just, of course, because she was dancing along.

“Angus, you bad dog!” called a rich voice, as clear as a bell, “how dare you be so rude, sir? Come back.”

And as Angus bounded off, out from the trees towards the astonished and admiring girl came the tall, slight form of the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

“I hope the dog has not done more than startle you?” she said, courteously, as she reached Hyacinth.

“Oh no, thank you, madame.” Hyacinth was wondering who this handsome foreigner could be. She had heard of no other guest

yet. "I am fond of dogs; and what a beauty he is."

"Is he not, Miss Lee?—pardon—I guessed who you were, and he is as wild as a March hare; only being three years old too, I think Angus is wonderfully good; we have just come back from the early Celebration at St Agnes's Church, and he lies quietly down in the porch till I come out."

"What a darling dog; Angus you call him—for I suppose you are his mistress?"

"Well, not exactly; he belongs to Mr Glen-Luna," returned Gabrielle.

"Does he? Isn't it dreadful that there does not seem any chance of his ever getting well? His life must be so miserable, so dull, so crushed," said Hyacinth, with tears in her eyes, "and Jessie says, I understood her so in town, that his companion is an old frump, who—ah, you are laughing at me!"

"A thousand pardons, Miss Lee, I did

not know his secretary, or nurse, or whatever they call her, was elderly."

"Oh, yes, I assure you Jessie Glen-Luna said so—that she was an old frump who wore bonnets of the year 1."

"Well, of course Miss Glen-Luna must know best," said Mrs Albany, demurely, seeing exactly what the joke was, and enjoying it, "but I should hardly think 'an old frump' a very lively or welcome companion for a young fellow of thirty."

"No, certainly not, and especially such a cavalier fellow as Douglas Glen-Luna always was," said Hyacinth; "I suppose you have never seen him, as he sees no one?"

"I have seen him very often, though, Miss Lee, and his secretary too."

"Have you, madame?" Hyacinth's blue eyes opened wide. "Then I was right, for I thought you were a guest, though Jessie said we were the first."

"I have been stopping here some time now," answered Gabrielle, with, Hyacinth

thought, a rather odd smile; "you may, perhaps, have heard my name—Albany—Mrs Leicester Albany."

"I never have, Mrs Albany, but I am most happy to have met you in a manner out of the beaten track. Here comes Jessie! Too late for introducing! Why, Jessie, what *are* you laughing about so much?"

For Jessie broke out irresistibly as she saw the two together, and now Mrs Albany was laughing too.

"Too late, Jessie! Miss Lee and I have already made acquaintance. *Au revoir!* Your breakfast bell is ringing, and I must go to your brother, who is waiting my return. Come, Angus."

"But—I don't quite—go to—oh, what a shame, Jessie!" exclaimed Hyacinth, with a peal of laughter. "Mrs Albany, *you* are the secretary after all!"

Mrs Albany swept a low bow.

"The old frump! Miss Lee *toute à vous.*"

“Oh, it was too bad of you, Jessie, to tell me that Mrs Albany—”

“I didn’t tell you, my dear; you suggested it, and I only agreed,” interrupted Jessie, delighted. “Mrs Albany answers the description exactly, only in an inverse ratio. Yours was the fancy—this lady the reality.”

“Pray don’t distress yourself, Miss Lee,” said Gabrielle, “I saw the joke directly, and have enjoyed it. May I tell Mr Glen-Luna? It will amuse him!”

“Tell him; yes, do. I should think it would amuse him, indeed! Shall I not see you again to-day, Mrs. Albany?”

“I do not think so, Miss Lee. I live, you see, in the west wing, and I seldom leave Mr Glen-Luna very long alone. Good-bye for the present.”

She shook hands, whistled to Angus, and turned off to the west wing.

“Frump, indeed!” said Hyacinth; “she is hardly five-and-twenty, and a woman for

the men to rave about. Good heaven ! Her husband must have been a perfect fiend to have treated her as you said."

"Perhaps she was in fault," returned Jessie. "She's got a will of her own. She was none of the meek wives, I'm certain."

"So much the better," retorted Hyacinth, tossing her head with proper truculence ; "if women had compiled the marriage service, I'm thinking the 'obey' business would run the other way. *I* wouldn't 'obey,' forsooth !"

"If you were in love, dear, you would think it a pleasure," said Jessie, sentimentally.

"Bosh !" returned Miss Hyacinth, in high scorn ; "don't be silly, Jessie ; you may think men angels, if you like. I don't, and I don't suspect Mrs Albany does."

It would be strange indeed if she had—
Leicester Albany's wife.





CHAPTER VII.

LEICESTER ALBANY EN VOYAGE—NOT ALL
SMOOTH SAILING.

LEICESTER ALBANY was certainly a very clever man, and a man of very considerable resources; but it is questionable whether he would have deliberately gone, knowing she was there, into the very house in which his wife was. For, although he possessed that almost unlimited brazen impudence and self-reliant conceit which generally characterises men of his stamp, he would hardly have walked with open eyes on to such dangerous ground; for he feared his wife, despite his defiance—

feared her stern threat that she would foil him. Still, after what she herself declared, how could she possibly prove his identity with her husband when she had destroyed every likeness, every writing, every vestige that could remind her of him? Indeed, if she made the charge at any time, he could give to her claim a very ugly colouring indeed, which would not hurt him, while it would be ruinous to her wherever she was. So he flung care to the winds, and made up his mind, as he said, to “go in and win.”

Jessie was *de facto* an heiress, for the frail life of a crippled brother was not much of an obstacle; and besides, he argued, he could not be too particular as to his selection; quite ready-made heiresses were not as plentiful as roses in June, and papas and mammas, or guardians of such rich ripe fruit, had an uncomfortable way of inquiring very closely into the antecedents and means of suitors, which scrutiny

the soi-disant Mr Clifford Brandon scarcely cared to court. Not that his present identity was absolutely taken up haphazard. Oh dear, no; he was far too wideawake a gentleman for that. He had, in his adventurer's life, before his marriage, come across, in America, a man of his own age, bearing the name of Clifford Brandon, and belonging distantly to a good family. This young fellow had died in an out-west city, and his people, if even they had ever seen him, certainly neither knew nor cared whether he were living or dead. So that now, if his assumed antecedents were challenged, he could claim or disclaim, as best suited him, connection with the Brandons of —shire.

Another reason for selecting Jessie as the heiress for his scheme was the footing his good luck had given him, and that he soon saw that she was one of those sentimental flirts who, if he could get her to fall in love with him (not a hard task

either, as her falling in love went), he could persuade her to elope, perhaps, if mamma frowned when it came to the proposal, or if his own wronged and haughty wife "crossed his tracks," as he expressed it. And then Jessie was really such a deuced pretty, charming little thing, that it was no such bad prospect. Few men knew better than Leicester Albany exactly how to play his cards with the ordinary run of women, especially flirts. It was such a woman as Gabrielle who puzzled—posed—him. To Jessie he had, while in town, paid just that happy mean of attention which, while suffering her to feel that he was *épris*, was not sufficiently marked overtly to attract undue notice from the society in which they moved, though club and five o'clock gossip credited Cliff Brandon with being a very decided admirer of "little Jessie Glen-Luna," and no one was surprised when it was understood that he joined the circle at Luna Park the

Monday after the family had returned there.

The statement with which he had come into the magic ring called "society" was strictly true. An aunt had left him a fortune, but it belonged to the past—not the present. He had come into a large fortune in money from this aunt at twenty-one; by the time he was thirty, when he saw, fell in love with, and married young Gabrielle Morville, he had squandered fully half the fortune, and the rest followed in the next seven years. He best knew how he had got the money on which he was now playing so bold a game to reinstate himself again, but that he had obtained a good supply, and had so managed that his resources would stand a fair investigation from papa Glen-Luna, and even the farce of a settlement is certain. It is astonishing what we can do if we only completely throw aside that tiresome "obstructive" conscience. And certainly our

very worthy friend had none of that. At the core, the man was a heartless roué, under the outward gloss, a gladiator capable of almost any deed which passion or interest made expedient. Is it a wonder that to such a man his hapless wife had declared that she would not, even if she could, set him free to wreck another life as he had hers.

He was to have gone down in time for luncheon, but somehow missed it—men are sometimes unpunctual as well as women—and so he lunched at the station, and went down by the next train, that reached Doring about five.

No carriage from the Hall was waiting, but when the porter saw the name and address on the luggage he informed its owner that a groom with the dogcart had been to meet the other train, and had left a message that he should meet this one.

“He’s only a little mistook the time, sir,” added the man, “and if you’d please wait a few minutes he can’t be long.”

“Thanks,” answered Albany, “but, as it is such a lovely day and country, I will walk on, and the dogcart can transport my portmanteau.”

The porter directed him to the park, and he left the station at an easy pace, lighting a cigar as he went.

He soon found his way into the broad Doring road, from which he got a glimpse of the river, and on the other side, through and over the hedges, lovely bits of that extremity of Luna Park ; not that Leicester Albany appreciated either, though he often affected an admiration for scenery and trees.

He had walked some little way, and had begun to wonder where the road turning off to the gates was, when he heard the roll of —unmistakably—carriage wheels and tramp of horses’ feet coming on behind, and, turning, saw a cloud of dust.

“Confound it,” muttered Albany, “what an awful dust !”

He stepped on to the grass, and drew

right back against the hedge to windward of the cloud, and the next minute an immense collie dog dashed past him, then an elegant low phaeton, drawn by the most magnificent pair of chesnut horses, all silver harnessed, that he had ever seen ; driven, too, by a lady who sat beside a young man, half reclining amongst a pile of crimson cushions. His face was turned the other way, and, if not, Albany would not have seen it, for his gaze, startled but exultant, was riveted on the driver, as the equipage, followed by a mounted attendant, swept past.

“By Heaven! have I caught you out at last, my immaculate wife!” he muttered, stepping out to watch the retreating carriage—“ma parole!—kept in style, too, while you’re about it. Down here, somehow, too. Jove! that’s dangerous; I must find you out and see what’s to be done; ha! my scornful wife, where is your standpoint now?”

He walked on again, and in a few minutes perceived an old hedger, just shouldering his tools to leave his work. The old man touched his hat to the gentleman, as is the courteous fashion of the peasantry, and Albany stopped.

“Good evening, friend. Did you see that carriage pass just now?”

“Lord sir, yes,” answered the old man, in a slightly amused tone; “they’re out driving and riding. Madame rides near every day. Them’s the master’s pet blood horses, sir, and young madame rides his own Arabian, which is as handsome as herself, bless her.”

A fierce thrill of jealousy shot through the man’s evil soul. He had flung away the flower himself, but he could not bear to think that another had gathered it.

“Indeed!” he said, with an irrepressible sneer, “and who or what is madame and the master?”

The truth never struck him; so had he

got it into his head that Sir Arthur's son was a miserable cripple.

The old man stared. To him it argued extraordinary ignorance not to know who "the master" was.

"Why, sir, the master is the master—Mr Douglas Glen-Luna—and madame is Mrs Albany, his secretary. My lady and all trusts everything to her. Ah! she is the sweetest young lady, sir."

"The devil!" came between Leicester's set teeth, and for a moment trees, and road, and sky above seemed as a mist before his eyes, so completely was he taken aback by the discovery that the very last woman he would have had near him now was actually under the same roof to which he was going; his ready wit and thought were completely staggered, and it was a minute before the livid lips could even frame a question.

"I suppose, then, that this Mrs Albany dines with the family—is treated quite like a friend?"

“Lord, yes, sir; ye see, sir, I often works in the garden, ’cause the head gardener knows I’m past heavy work, and he gives me a job, and that’s how I hear a deal about the Hall gentry. Mrs Albany ain’t with the family much, though, ’cause she lives in the left wing along with the rest of Mr Douglas’s people. *He* lives there, ye see, sir, and she’s always with him—no one else.”

“But, my good man, I understood that Mr Glen-Luna was so nearly crushed in the accident,—that he was a mere wreck.”

“Did ye, sir? Dear, dear, only to think now. Well, then, he’s the most sound bi-eautifulest ‘wreck’ as ever I see.”

“And,” added Albany, “that he was dying by inches?”

“God forbid, sir! He may be, in course; I ain’t no scholard, and can’t say positive, but I never heerd that. It’d break the old gentleman’s heart to lose him.”

“ I suppose so, the only son. And has this Mrs Albany been with him long ? ”

“ She came in May, sir.”

“ A widow, eh ? ”

“ No, sir ; the gardener told me she was separated from her husband.”

“ Indeed ; and she doesn’t, you say, leave Mr Glen-Luna ?—doesn’t, for instance, come into the drawing-room in the evening ? ”

“ I don’t fancy she do, sir ; but, in course, I couldn’t say. It’s certain sure she wouldn’t be there long, ’cause she belongs to the master’s service, ye see, sir.”

Albany had got as much as he could out of the old hedger, so he gave him a shilling, and walked on.

Good heaven ! What should he do now ? What step must he take ? Had she seen him, and already told her companion who he was ? What if she met him unannounced, unexpectedly, in the house, before others, and at once unmasked him ? He

must get a line, only a line, to her some way ; but how, before night ?

“The devil is in it !” he said aloud, with a savage stamp of his foot. “I must find out more when I reach the Hall, and if she does show at all I must retire with a headache. Get a letter to her I must. Curse her !”

Curses come home to roost, Mr Leicester Albany.





CHAPTER VIII.

“RECLER POUR MIEUX SAUTER.”

IF ever a man felt himself to be walking on dangerous ground now, that man was Leicester Albany ; for although, as he walked slowly on, he matured a scheme of warfare which he was certain must ensure his young wife's silence, yet, with all his unlimited self-assurance, there yet remained in the background of his mind's picture of safety an uncomfortable, vague, nightmare sort of feeling that, win as he might for the time, the woman who had stood uncorrupted against his foulest vices—the darkest temptations with which he had

surrounded her—would somehow in the end make good her stern menace.

"Do what you will, I will foil you!"

To turn back now would be to lose the game before it was fairly begun, and such a retreat never entered into his head. It would be all right if he could get hold of her before she saw him. Even then he must write so that the note would not identify him as her husband, which now it was his whole cue to deny.

"And I do believe," he muttered, "that I have got a blank envelope in my pocket-book. What luck; I'll look for it, so that part of the business is easy."

He stopped and looked into the pocket of his handsome pocket-book. Yes, there it was; or rather, they, for he found two blank envelopes. One glance at his watch, and Leicester Albany seated himself on the bank by the roadside, wrote something in pencil, carefully disguising his handwriting, on a leaf of the book, tore it out, enclosed

it, and in the same hand addressed it—
“Mrs Albany, care of Mrs May, ——
Street, W.C.” Then he rubbed the letter
in the dust till it looked shady enough,
and, putting it into his pocket with a
smile of triumph, proceeded on his way.

His arrival at the Hall completed the
invited guests, for Percy Rosslyn and the
Saltouns had arrived by luncheon time.

“I shall scold the groom well for being
so late at the station, my dear Brandon,”
said Sir Arthur, as the latest guest ap-
peared in the drawing-room before dinner.

“Oh! no, you really must not,” returned
Albany; “especially as it not only gave me
a delightful walk, but has, I believe, enabled
me to be the means of restoring some pro-
perty to a lady; that is,” glancing inquir-
ingly at Jessie, near whom he was standing,
“if any of you know whether in this neigh-
bourhood there is anyone named Albany,
I picked up a letter addressed—see, here
it is!”

"Why," exclaimed Jessie, "Mrs Albany is my brother's secretary! That address is where she lodged, isn't it, mamma? She must have dropped it out. She was driving with Douglas this afternoon."

"Shall I send it to her, Mr Brandon?" sweetly asked her ladyship, completely hoaxed and unsuspecting, with her hand on the bell.

"Thank you, dear Lady Glen-Luna, I hope the lady has not yet discovered her loss."

Here a footman noiselessly entered, and received the soiled letter and a message.

"Lady Glen-Luna's compliments, and she thought Mrs Albany must have dropped her letter while driving, as one of the gentlemen found it on his way to the Hall.

Was there to be no rest or peace for Gabrielle Albany!

She had just completed dressing for dinner, and came into her own boudoir, when the message and letter were given her.

The blood seemed to rush back on her very heart, even as the long taper fingers took the dusty envelope. There was no definite thought or suspicion, but simply she knew at once that cramped odd hand—in pencil too—was utterly strange to her, and that she never had had, and therefore never had dropped, such a letter.

"Thank you, James." How calmly she spoke—even carelessly. "It is only an old letter, but still, carry my compliments and thanks to the gentleman. Which of them was it?"

"I think, madam, it was Mr Brandon who gave my lady the letter," James answered, and retired.

Gabrielle stood for a minute, with locked hands and breath drawn almost in gasps. She saw at once what this letter—sent under so cunning a subterfuge—really was, and knew that the man to whom so heavy a chain bound her had dared to put in force a scheme which three words of hers could

shatter like glass. Merciful Heaven! and this villain was under the same roof as herself, and worse—ten thousand times worse—under the same roof as the man whose life was dearer to her than her own, dearer than all, save honour. Oh, how thankful she was that this letter had not been given under his keen glance, as she broke it open and read—in that hand which she never could have proved to be Albany's.

"I saw you drive past to-day, and I must see you alone to-night; till then keep silence if you value life and honour. I will wait in view of the west wing terrace till I see you come out, and then follow to whatever spot you lead the way."

If at that moment the writer of that letter had stood before her, and a weapon lain within her reach, Heaven only knows what might have happened; and yet, save that she lifted her hands above her head, as if in mute agony of passionate appeal, there was little outward sign of the tempest within

—such a tempest as, if yielded to for one moment, must have swept down all control and left traces which could not have escaped the notice of Douglas Glen-Luna. Must she ever crush heart and passion, and bitter agony! Could honour, brain, and soul for ever bear the cruel pressure of this fierce self-suppression, self-warfare! Was there sin in the very strength that came to her now, disloyalty at heart in the voiceless, passionate cry that went up—“For his sake! O God! for his sake I must, I will, bear all! dare all—even to the charge of dishonour!” Truly, if there was, the sin lay on the head of the man who had broken every vow, every bond, every moral tie that bound him.

It was easy for her to steal out when all the house was still, and at rest, but to meet him quite alone never even entered her head. Faithful, and when required, most formidable, Angus was, by design on the part of his master's two attendants, left to sleep

loose in the *salon*, with the door of the corridor open, so that to take him with her was as easy as to creep out herself. She was safe enough, she knew, under such guardianship. It crossed her how her husband—a stranger to the mansion—would get out and in undiscovered; and, in fact, that difficulty had occurred to himself, until shown his room to dress for dinner, on his arrival, and there he found that a strong trellis, covered with roses outside the window, would make a ready means of egress and ingress.

It was an intensely still, dark night, with scarce a breath of air to stir one leaf of the stately forest trees which towered in the gloom, like some monsters of a dream, as Leicester Albany stole under the shadow like the guilty thing he was, and so skirted round to a sheltered spot which commanded a full view of the west wing, now as darkened as the rest of the massive pile of building.

Did the man's thoughts go back nine years, as he stood there in the ghostly midnight hour? Did memory recall a bitter, dark, dreary winter's morning, when he had waited under the gloomy school wall with all a lover's impatience for his mistress, all the roué's eager passion for his newest toy, for the beautiful child almost, barely sixteen, with whom he was then so madly in love? Did he remember how, that morning, after the Church had made that child his wedded wife for ever, he had held her in his arms and taken Heaven to witness that his love and care should never fail? And how had he kept that vow through all the long seven years she had lived with him? Did not one flash of remorse or compunction stir him now, as he stood there, bent on using the foulest weapon man can use against a woman? No, not once; his soul was a chaos of evil passions, hate, and fear, and even a flash now and again of his old base passion to

make fuel for the fierce jealousy which ran through all.

Watching like a tiger for its prey, he presently saw a dark robed figure come suddenly—it seemed from he knew not where—on to the terrace, and pause, one hand holding a huge dog by a short chain.

Albany started, with a savage muttered oath.

"What the devil does the girl bring that beast for! I am her husband, after all—curse the folly that made me so!"

But, for all his angry fear of the dog, he followed the dark figure as it flitted on like a ghost through the gloom towards the thicket of trees just in the boundary between the gardens and the park.

Under those Gabrielle stopped, and stood as white, as still, as beautiful as a classic statue, till he drew near. Then Angus suddenly crouched, as if to spring, with such a savage growl and menacing show of white teeth, that Albany started back.

"Hold that damned beast in fast," he said between his teeth, "for if he touches me I'll throttle him."

"I advise you," she said coolly, "not to so much as offer to even touch him or his mistress; for in the moment you do so I will drop the chain I hold, and he would pull you down like a reed. Do you think I should be mad enough to meet you—you, Leicester Albany—in this lonely spot at midnight *alone*? Quiet, Angus; you must wait my word, if it is needed. For you, speak at once and quickly, for I have already held my peace too long; but to-morrow they shall all know who and what they have in their house. I will unmask the fine hawk they take for such a dove."

"And," said Leicester, folding his arms on his broad breast, and looking her full in the face with those bold, insolent black eyes, "in so doing blast yourself."

"Ay!" she answered with bitter scorn, "by avowing myself the wife of such a

thing as you ; but more than that is beyond your power. You cannot, dare not, deny our marriage ; for I have the certificate."

Albany laughed in sneering triumph.

"You are welcome to show it ! You have the certificate of your marriage with Leicester Albany ; but—*where is he ?*"

"Where is he ?" Gabrielle repeated, slowly, and her hand closed suddenly on the dog's silver chain ; "standing before me just now. Creeping into a noble house on a false identity, to steal its daughter's honour and peace. I know you, my husband."

"By the Lord ! but I'll show you directly that you don't yet, though you are beautiful enough to make a fellow glad to claim you in one way, if he can't in another. Look you ! you fled from Leicester Albany in 'Frisco two years ago. You came here ; got a separation *ex parte* ; destroyed every line or likeness or vestige of your husband.

Those were your own words, you remember."

Ay! too well. The miserable woman saw at once the terrible mistake, the fatal admission, she had made; but, though the very blood seemed to freeze to ice in her veins, she never lost her haughty, unflinching front.

"Go on!" she said, with stern brevity; but her free hand was pressed against her bosom now.

"There is no one in England," Albany went on, deliberately, "and none that you know of anywhere, who could or would prove my identity. Whereas (for I did not assume a mask haphazard, be sure) I can very readily prove myself to be Clifford Brandon. You threaten to go to Sir Arthur and Lady Glen-Luna and strip that mask. *C'est à dire*—you will swear that I am your scamp of a husband, Leicester Albany."

"I will swear to the truth," she answered, in the same stern way. "I warned you

that, if you tried this dastard scheme, I would foil you, at whatever cost."

"*Ah ça !*—at whatever cost ; but what if that cost were such hopeless disgrace to yourself that you lost this, no doubt," with a cruel sneer, "particularly pleasant, happy berth ? Mr Douglas Glen-Luna would, of course, feel the loss of his fair companion so terribly that—"

"Keep to your point, you coward," she broke in, with so fierce an accent and gesture that Angus uttered another savage menace, "and dare not to name with your shameful lips a man who is to you as light is to the very darkness of Hades. Keep to your point."

The dog had crouched down again at his mistress's feet, laying his muzzle along between his paws, with his large, watchful brown eyes fixed steadily on the enemy. Leicester drew back a step, with almost a shudder of deadly fear ; but he answered Gabrielle at once.

“I repeat, you would hardly like to lose the singular situation you hold here; but I have no particular wish to cross your pleasure, if you are content to let me go mine undisturbed. If you will exercise that very clever brain of yours, you will see that, having destroyed every letter, likeness, paper—*en fin*, every proof of my identity, your threatened exposé and claim to me as your husband rests solely on your unsupported word or oath. You *cannot* prove me to be other than what I appear—Clifford Brandon.”

“Two of the family, at least,” she said, as he paused, “will take my word before yours. Of course, you will deny the charge. I expected that.”

“I will do more than that,” he answered, coming a step nearer, and dropping each word one by one. “As surely as you tell them who I am, so surely I swear—and if ever man kept his oath I will keep this! I have arranged the whole story so as to fit—

that you, Gabrielle Albany, had claimed me for the husband you knew to be really dead, since, because finding you here, I, Clifford Brandon, told you I would tell them what you really were. I will swear that you had been *my mistress!*”

There was a silence after those last words—dead, awful silence. She never moved one hair’s-breadth, or spoke or breathed; but stood there, looking at him—looking, looking, with strange, dread, wide-open gaze in the great dark eyes, as if she had looked last on some awful thing of horror, and died there where she stood—thought, powers, the very scorn and tempest of passions itself seemed stilled before this last fell outrage, as the war of the wild elements is sometimes subdued by the wilder raging of the battle.

“My God! Is this shape of humanity before me man born of woman, or—devil incarnate!”

The passionate words came, awed and

hushed, under her breath ; and she put one beautiful hand before her eyes, as if to shut out some sight too pitiably painful to look upon. From far off up the river came the ceaseless music of the falling waters over the weir, and nearer once or twice the rustle of a leaf as some night bird fluttered from bough to bough, and a little whispering breeze stole like some ghost or avenging spirit through the lofty trees ; it seemed as if the very pall of night had lowered darker yet over the sleeping world.

Leicester moved uneasily. He could better have borne, better have met, a blaze of passion—a fierce blast of scorn and wrath. But this, this hurled him to an unmeasurable depth beneath passion or scorn ; it scathed him like fire, and to break the spell, he spoke, slowly, as before, watching her.

“ You know now what I will do ; and more, I leave it to your quick wits and imagination to foresee all I will add and

suggest, in the peculiar and anomalous position you hold to the heir of Glen-Luna."

Ah! there is that helpless charge, that one being so dependent on her, whose recovery lay fully half in her hands, whose life she knew too terribly was under her guardianship, whom she had sworn before Heaven not to leave, come what might; whom, try to crush it as she would, because she was another man's loyal wife, she loved—in him, Douglas Glen-Luna, lay at once her strength and her weakness, her power to bear and temporise even now; and, like Achilles's foot, her one vulnerable point.

In that silence the vital force of her masculine mind, the noble power of her woman's heart, had regained its steadfast strength to meet and grasp the whole position. She saw at once that this once, at least at present, her husband was master of the dangerous ground on which both stood, that she was beaten back, and must yield

outwardly once and for all. Aut fer, aut feri. She could not strike yet. She must bear till she could, for the sake of that one being so loved and so helpless!

"Well," said Leicester Albany, "which is it to be—peace or war? Are we two, Mrs Albany and Clifford Brandon, to meet in this house as strangers—or, sometime protector and mistress?"

She turned upon him now with such fierce passion and pitiless, withering scorn that the man actually recoiled.

"If the mother who bore you could have foreseen this night she would surely have hushed you to death on her breast, as I would the child I bore you if God in His mercy had not spared me such stern duty! If she had lived to see this hour, she must have cursed the hour that gave you birth, as I do the first moment you saw this miserable beauty of mine. Go your way. We are strangers here, but God of Justice above," she said, lifting her hand, upraised

like some avenging prophetess of old, "hear me, this man's most wronged, most miserable wife, call down upon his head Thy just vengeance of his deeds!"

"Gabrielle!"

The dog sprang to his feet with an absolute howl of ferocity at that exclamation, and reared up so suddenly, so furious to leap on the man that, had the hand that grasped the chain been less strong, or the command, "Down, dear Angus!" less firm, Albany's chance of life had been but slight. He started back as his wife drew the noble animal closer to her side, and said with livid lips,—

"If that cursed brute means to fly like that, I warn you and your precious Douglas to keep in your own rooms."

"I warn you," said Gabrielle, with a stern menace that shook him, "that if harm comes to either dog or master, neither your secret nor your life shall be safe for one hour. Lay that well to heart, Leicester Albany."

She turned and glided away swiftly under the trees, and mistress and dog were lost in the gloom.

"But she is beaten this time, by Heaven!" muttered Albany, moving slowly forward; "she is forced to yield at last, with all her proud scorn."

Was she? fool and blind guide! you forget the old wise saw,—"*Reculer pour mieux sauter.*"





CHAPTER IX.

ANTAGONISM.

BRAIN and heart racked, a fitful, restless sleep that was the very opposite of rest, and that terrible waking with a dull, heavy sense of anguish and weight which most of us have experienced at some period—the feeling that the day was to be *got through*, not lived—that was Gabrielle Albany's awakening to another day, a most painful position to maintain, a most difficult part to act out. And yet, the moment she entered Douglas Glen-Luna's presence, she seemed to pass at once into another, brighter atmosphere, as from darkness to light. But she noticed that he was restless, unquiet, and when pre-

sently the sound of many voices came wafted in from the lovely gardens without, he turned his curly head sharply from the window with a quick, half-smothered—

“I cannot. I *cannot*!”

A soft, firm hand on his shoulder, whose touch vibrated along every chord of his being.

“Not even for your autocrat?” said the low, rich tones.

“Oh, Gabrielle, if you only knew how I dread it!”

“Don’t I know? Don’t I realise your feelings as much as if I were a man myself?” she answered, with a force all the more intense from its suppression. “Don’t I exactly feel with you, for you? Only I know, all the more from your dread of the very first step, how necessary it is that the cordon of morbid suffering should be broken through once and for all. I know, too, that it is the first break through which is the worst, or, rather, that once faced it

will prove half a shadow. It was no sin or fault of yours, but an accident, and that too, because you lost your chance of safety to save a human life."

He turned his head to kiss the white hand that lay on his shoulder, and lift dark penitent eyes to hers.

"Dear Gabrielle, forgive your wayward scapegrace charge, for the hundredth time I cry peccavi."

"I suppose you must be forgiven," said Mrs Albany, smiling. "Ah, there is Miss Lee's sweet voice again ; what a lovely girl she is. Now confess that you will be glad to have a second recipient for your pretty speeches."

She had moved a little as she spoke to pick a few of the rare flowers that scented the air, and it was well that she did not see the sudden flash in those dark eyes, or the instant look of intense agony, the fierce setting of the curved lips, and quick clenching of the chiselled hand that followed.

Then he laughed a little and sang—

“ ‘There be none of Beauty’s daughters
With a magic like thee,
And like music on the waters
Is thy sweet voice to me.’ ”

“ I won’t confess to anything but that, especially as I mean it, and I am sure I deserve that exquisite little button-hole you have been gathering on purpose for me as a reward—”

“ For what, I wonder? Your wickedness? ” Gabrielle said lightly, as she bent down to fasten the flowers in his button-hole; “ but I’ll forgive you this time.”

“ Which is more than I deserve, your tone says. I don’t believe I shall really make my peace with you until I have passed the Rubicon and meet some of these people.”

“ I am going to fetch your hat and mine, and we will go out into the grounds. You can trust me not to leave you to thei-

tender mercies," she added, smiling, as she left the room, ringing for Harford as she went.

For one moment Douglas Glen-Luna covered his eyes with his hand.

"Oh Gabrielle, my heart, my love! it is too late for me—only to save honour—only to keep the secret locked here in this heart. I dare not, *cannot* send thee from me into the wide, harsh world again, God help me! I can bear all, suffer all, for thee, and make no sign."

Ah me! but the heart is still only human; can he guard every look, every throb, almost every movement! The prayer had gone up with all the deep earnestness of a noble faith, a spotless honour, that would not wrong her honour—another man's wife—or his by one breath, one passing thought, and surely, surely such prayers for help against dire temptation are heard!

There were no traces of emotion when she came back; but, as she wheeled his

chair to the lift, he said, with his ever bright smile—for was not her mere presence happiness, despite the suffering beneath?—

“It has crossed me often, Gabrielle, how odd it would be if ever I were to meet again that man I saved in the accident.”

They were descending in the lift now, as she asked,—

“You would know him again, then?”

“Oh, yes; he got into the train as I did at Dover. I remember, too, that I did not like his face, though he was certainly handsome. Here we are, safe at the bottom—thanks, Harford—and here is Angus waiting for us.”

The collie bounded on through the open hall door, and Gabrielle wheeled the chair on to the terrace.

Douglas drew a breath of relief; no one was in sight from that point, nor did any sound of voices reach their ears.

“They all seem to have disappeared,” said Mrs Albany, quietly pushing the chair

before her down the incline from the marble terrace to the lawn, "but I suppose they have scattered."

How inexpressibly she dreaded the first meeting with her disguised husband, before Glen-Luna's keen eyes, she only knew, but it was Albany's powers of acting she distrusted, not her own.

"Would you like to stop here?" she said, arresting the chair at a beautiful spot just below the wide lawn, from which a full view of the river spread before them.

"If you like it, I do, *chère Gabrielle*, a lady's wish is law—Ha! what is the matter, Angus?"—he interrupted himself suddenly, as Jessie's clear treble, answered by a man's deep tones coming on behind, caught their ears, and the dog uttered that peculiar low, deep growl which seems to vibrate on the very air—"there is some one near whom he dislikes! who is it with Jessie, Gabrielle?"

She had flushed and grown ashen white

for a second as she stood behind him, but she answered low and quickly—

“Hush, I don’t know ; they are too near to look round. Lie down, Angus.”

Was the faithful animal’s true instinct going to betray his mistress ? She shivered as she saw his master’s glance bent suspiciously on the dog, who lay exactly as he had done last night at her feet, with his nose between his paws and his eyes, watchful.

“Whoever it is,” said Douglas under his breath, “he has seen him before, I’ll swear.”

Before Gabrielle could reply, Jessie and her companion came up.

“Douglas, may I ?—Mr Clifford Brandon—my brother—and his secretary, Mrs Albany.”

The moment Douglas’s eyes rested on the guest a quick look of recognition flashed into their depths, while Leicester started, even violently, with an exclamation.

“ Good Heaven ! I cannot be mistaken ! You were my fellow-traveller eighteen months ago, and saved my life at the cost—”

Glen - Luna interrupted him with a haughty flush on his bronzed cheek, but courteous words,—

“ Pardon me. Let that pass, Mr Brandon ; it is strange that we should meet again. I recognised you directly.”

Gabrielle had seen that, and her hand had closed with a fierce grip on the handle of the chair, and her teeth set like a vice. Was it for this worthless life that one so precious had been well nigh wrecked ? Why had he not let this dastard—her husband—die ? It so maddened the wild, passionate heart to know this that she had almost stretched forth her right hand and denounced him for what he was, only for the one paramount sake of the man she loved. Jessie’s voice roused her to the present,—

“It is odd, and so delightful! Just like a romance, isn’t it, Mrs Albany?”

Mrs Albany’s haughty lip curled, but she only said, dryly,—

“There is more romance and tragedy, too, in real life than any romance can tell. Where is Miss Lee? I heard her voice.”

“I don’t know. She ran in for something, and so Mr Brandon and I strolled on till, you know, we saw you. Douglas, do make that horrid dog be quiet. What is he growling at?”

“I am afraid, my dear, he is rude enough to growl at a guest. Be silent, Angus, like a good dog.” The collie leaped up eagerly, and began licking the hand stretched to him. “Angus, Mr Brandon, is, I am ashamed to say, capricious, but perhaps he will make friends when he knows you better. Perhaps you are not fond of dogs?”

“I cannot say that I am, Mr Glen-Luna,

and so, of course, dogs would not like me ; but I suppose this one is good tempered ? ”

“ A splendid temper ; only, like most of us, he has a will of his own, and his own likes and dislikes ; he is very ungallant, too, for he will not speak to Lady Glen-Luna, coax him as she will.”

“ Then Angus shows very bad taste,” said Albany, glancing antagonistically at the dog. “ Shall you join the party this afternoon, Mr Glen-Luna ? I believe we are all to go over to somewhere and see a cricket match.”

“ Oh, yes, do ! ” exclaimed Jessie, clapping her hands like a gleeful child. She knew that the rôle of *ingénue* suited her, and “ took ” with men of Clifford Brandon’s age.

“ No,” answered Douglas, quietly, and with an inward shrinking which Gabrielle’s subtle sympathy felt ; “ I do not think I shall.”

“ And I think,” added his attendant, urbanely, “ that if we may be excused now

we had better go on as you wished, Mr Glen-Luna."

"Thanks; good-bye, Jessie; Mr Brandon, adieu for the present; you will excuse us, I am sure."

Albany bowed low, giving his beautiful wife such a look as he turned away. Jealousy may go with hate and fear, as well as with passion, far better than with love; and in that covert look there was both hate, and fear, and jealousy. She met it steadily—in proud contempt. That look was nothing new to the roué's hapless wife. She only bowed coldly, and wheeled the light chair away.

"Quite away, dear Gabrielle," said Douglas, shivering; "I cannot bear more of them yet, even because you wish it!"

"I do not wish it just yet." Her soft hand touched him gently. "What do you think of this Mr Brandon?"

Douglas leaned right back, so that he could look up into her face.

"As Angus does, and—as you do. I don't like his face on that second, any more than on the first seeing; there is something entirely repellant and antagonistic to me in the man."

"So there is to me," said Albany's wife, quietly; "I should not like to see any one I cared for his wife, I think."

"No," said Douglas, strongly; "and if he is doing more than flirt with Jessie I shall speak to my father; they are all—by their letters—so taken with him. By the saints! I am almost tempted to the wicked wish that I had never saved his life."

"I would to Heaven you had not," she said, between her teeth. "You have paid too heavy a cost if—if," she added recovering herself, "face is any indication to a man's life."

"It is an indication there, most decidedly," said Glen-Luna; "I don't like him, and never shall; and, I am certain, no woman

like you ever would. Am I not right, Gabrielle?"

"Yes."


How much language there may be in a single word! What a story lay in that quiet "yes!"





CHAPTER X.

GABRIELLE BETRAYS DOUGLAS.

“ ‘  H bon comme ça,’ as they say in New Orleans !” said Douglas, settling himself contentedly amongst the rich, soft cushions of the phaeton that afternoon ; “ I think one ordeal is enough for one day. I’m quite happy here, driving, with only my dear autocrat for a companion.”

She had the high-spirited chesnuts well in hand as they drove at a good pace through the park, Harford, as usual, riding a little ahead. She looked down with an odd smile quivering on her lips as Douglas spoke, and said,—

“One may have too much of even a good thing, you know. I think you would, in time, tire of me, if you had no other society.”

She spoke half in jest, half in earnest, but not a tinge of coquetry in either; it was not in the woman.

“Wicked Gabrielle! you must think me very fickle—or at least changeable, if that is a milder word.”

“*Au contraire*. I know you are the very opposite of fickle—the entire reverse of changeable, both in your likes and dislikes.”

“Thanks for such a good character, and yet you assert that I shall get tired of *you*, of all people under the sun.”

“Why not, *mon ami*?” turning, with her winning smile. “I did not say that *au fond* you would like me or my company less, but that in time you would tire of having nothing else—no other society to make a change, a variation from mine.”

“Well,” said he, complacently, “I have

tried the experiment now for nearly three months, and I feel still calmly contented to try it as long as I am,—what I am now, except—”

“Except what?”

“That you will tire of me, Gabrielle.”

Her hand tightened on the reins, and the dark eyes looked out steadily before her as she answered,—

“I shall not tire of you. The question or position so reversed is not synonymous.”

“*Comment?*”

“Is it likely I should weary of kindness, of a home, of honour safely sheltered?”

She was unconscious of the stress on the “I”—of the suppressed, always suppressed—passion and pathos in her low tones and manner, but it made the man’s heart beat and the wild blood leap in his veins, and it was full a minute before he could answer, before he dared trust himself to speak.

“Forgive me, Gabrielle, I would not wound you for worlds.”

“You never have; you could not,” she interposed, a little hurriedly; “it is memory that stings and wounds, not you. I am happy here.”

Gold then deeply alloyed, happiness only in his presence, in the present, on the merest surface of the ground that was hecatombed with suffering and danger, for which there was no future, only a dreary waste of years hard to face at twenty-five. And hers was not one of the lighter natures that can simply sun itself in the present hour and shut its eyes to the future, any more than Douglas could.

Neither spoke until they had passed out of the park by a gate from which three roads soon diverged. Harford glanced back a telegraphic inquiry to his mistress, received a decided little nod, and the courier rode on up the middle of the three roads, the carriage following, its fair driver remarking carelessly,—

“Harford said this was a pretty road by

which we can get round to the river side above the lock ; we have not come out this way yet either."

"I don't think we have, but, whether or no, your wish is law," was the gallant reply, at which Gabrielle laughed. Perhaps he would scold her in a little while, but she kept up a lively conversation that beguiled the way and chained his attention to herself ; no hard task, certainly, for a woman so young and beautiful and brilliant, and that, though she knew it not, the woman he loved. What wonder that those dark eyes watched the ever changing play of the mobile face at his side, and took little heed of where she drove or the scenes around, or of the sound of voices once or twice borne on the breeze, till suddenly a corner in the lane was turned. Harford had thrown wide a five-barred gate, and standing erect to see well before her, Gabrielle drove through and reined up her horses in style.

“Gabrielle! you wicked thing! to play me such a trick!”

“*Ah mea culpa!* forgive me the betrayal. See what a pretty sight it is.”

So it was, for they were in the large cricket-field of which Jessie had spoken in the morning; there were the players dotting the field, for the game was at its height; the white tents and gay flags, the carriages and varied vehicles drawn up not far off, and the crowd of spectators; the élite gathered a little to the right of Glen-Luna's cortège, the rest variously disposed—all gaily dressed, of course, for it was the grand match between the County Eleven and the Langbourne Club, and everybody had turned out, from the county magnates to the peasant, all just now watching the play with too intent an interest to notice the addition to the company present.

Douglas had for one moment flushed painfully as his quick eye singled out the

party from Luna Hall, but he answered Mrs Albany,—

“I believe you and Harford planned this between you.”

“Add Dr Neville, who first told me of the match, and I will confess my fault frankly,” she said, looking down on him as she still stood. “You will forgive me, and try”—(this with a soft pleading tone)—“to enjoy the scene and society.”

“I will try, for your sake. Ha! what a splendid hit! this way, too, Gabrielle; take care!”

Straight off the bat, with the velocity and force of a cannon shot, came the ball, as if it had been aimed at that slight erect figure which in that second only Glen-Luna’s lightning quickness and dexterity saved from the fatal blow. Every eye followed that splendid hit—saw instantly the danger in its flight—every one, breathless, saw Douglas start forward, his right hand only, it seemed, touched the ball, spun it

upwards straight as an arrow, caught it again as it fell, and deftly threw it up to long-off as he ran forwards.

There was a ringing cheer from the spectators as Douglas leaned back again beside Gabrielle, who had instantly resumed her seat; many there recognised him at once, many more guessed who he was, but almost before he could answer Gabrielle's anxious "You are hurt" with a "No, all is well," the phaeton was surrounded, besieged by the Hall party, all with but one note—delighted meeting, heartiest welcome and pleasure to see Douglas Glen-Luna amongst them again—such a Babel of tongues that at first it was difficult for either him or Sir Arthur or Adeline to introduce Mrs Albany.

"It's so awfully jolly to see you again, old boy, you know," said Percy Rosslyn, who had started and muttered, "By Jove! the Vienna beauty," when he saw Douglas's companion, "and I have had the honour of seeing you nearly two years ago, Mrs Albany."

“Indeed, Mr Rosslyn, where was that?”

“At the opera in Vienna,” and there he drew back as Hyacinth Lee, who had not at first approached, came up, with frank hand held out to hand as frank.

“Miss Lee, how glad I am to see you again!”

“The pleasure is reciprocal, then, Mr Glen-Luna,” Hyacinth answered, brightly and earnestly; “and isn’t it jolly, Mrs Albany, to see an old friend’s face? And no one, I believe, would have seen you for a long time but for that splendid catch. You will stop, won’t you, till the stumps are drawn, and drive back with the rest of us, in a troupe? Do make him, Mrs Albany.”

Gabrielle laughed a little.

“My dear Miss Lee, you evidently think he is like the chesnuts—held well in hand.”

“Of course he is, Mrs Albany,” returned saucy, laughing Hyacinth, “and it’s only what men are good for—to hear and obey.”

“A pleasant task when beauty gives the

order," said courtly Douglas, bowing his handsome head, with a wicked glance from Gabrielle to Hyacinth, and the other young man laughed, and cried "Oh."

"You've not let your silver tongue grow rusty for want of use," said Percy Rosslyn, glancing at Mrs Albany.

"It has only improved by keeping, my son," retorted Glen-Luna.

"Like good wine," added young Saltoun ; "but I don't suppose you let your complimentary powers grow rusty for want of use," with a bow to Mrs Albany which pointed his own compliment. "Ah, there are some more new comers in a victoria."

Both Douglas and Mrs Albany looked round, and the former instantly beckoned with a glad exclamation that made Hyacinth look up quickly—

"Neville and his sister !"

As the mellow, flute-like tones rang out, Hyacinth Lee looked up to meet the smiling gaze of a pair of bright hazel eyes,

the handsome owner of which was the next minute introduced to her by Douglas, as "his old friend, Miss Lee."

"Not a very old friend, I should think," said Chandos Neville, bending low to the lovely girl before him, "unless we put friendship beyond the reckoning of dates and years."

"Of course we do, Dr Neville," said she, laughingly, "we count our likes and dislikes by their worth, don't we?"

"The worth of a dislike," repeated the physician, "what does Mrs Albany say to that, eh?"

"I beg your pardon, Dr Neville," — Gabrielle had been speaking to Rose.

"Why, Miss Lee speaks of 'the worth of dislike.' Is there anything of worth in dislike, do you think?"

"I suppose there may be, if the dislike is thoroughly deserved," answered Albany's wife; and then Douglas interposed, to present the new-comers to those who were

gathered about the carriage, the centre of attraction—with its two brilliant occupants. But presently, when a splendid hit had again called the general attention to the field, and the party had dropped into groups, Neville gave Mrs Albany a glance and, touching Douglas, said, gently—

“I saw that catch, and I am afraid you have hurt yourself a little ; ten weeks ago such a movement would have made you swoon with pain. Are you hurt ?”

“I don’t think so, I couldn’t help it if I were,” was the quick low answer, “the ball would have killed her. I am all right, indeed, Neville ; it may have tired me.”

“Yes, you are getting a little fatigued, I think,” said the physician ; “I suppose,” with a smile, “you have a nice scolding in store for Mrs Albany when you get her all to yourself again.”

“*Ah, foi !* if I can manage it,” said Douglas, “which is very doubtful ; was not

she wicked to betray me here, like that? I never expected that from you, Gabrielle."

"*Et tu Brute!*" laughed his beautiful companion, "your reproach touches me to the heart, I assure you, monsieur; only you must also scold Dr Neville and Harford, for both were in the plot."

"So I suppose; I'm a very ill-used being, I think, but I won't scold you till we get home, my dear tyrant."

"I do not think your scolding will hurt her, my dear," remarked Sister Rose, and at that moment Lady Glen-Luna came up again, on Leicester Albany's arm.

"Douglas, you must really join us all in the drawing-room this evening! Now you have once broken the ice, dear, we are not going to spare you, or you either, of course, dear Mrs Albany."

"Dear" Mrs Albany shook her curly head with the softest of apologetic smiles.

"You will kindly excuse us this evening,

I am sure, Lady Glen-Luna ; further fatigue would be too much, I think."

"Douglas, do you hear that decree ? Do, please, rescind it."

"Rank treason, Adeline," said Glen-Luna, lazily ; "I'm too loyal a subject to dream of disputing the royal decree."

"Bad boy ! Mr Brandon, will you try your powers of persuasion ?"

"The task of the Danaeïdes, madam, when my poor powers are to be matched against those of Mrs Albany," answered Leicester, bowing, but she had turned to speak to Sister Rose, calling her attention with an amused smile, to a group of ladies at a safe distance.

"Your opposite neighbour and her coterie," she said ; "haven't they been enjoying a nice scandalmongering ?"

Which was true enough, from the moment the elegant phaeton had entered the field, and Douglas's clever catch had drawn attention to it.

“Really,” said Mrs Orde, “that woman’s impudence gets worse and worse! He never was seen anywhere, and now she makes him come right amongst everybody, driving in like that, at his side, as if she was—Dear me, the face some women have! He’s quite her slave, Miss Chattaway.”

“Disgraceful, I call it, dear Mrs Orde; and just see how the men have gathered around her, laughing and flirting; her *friend* and charge will be jealous.”

“Of course, just what she wants, I dare say,” put in Mrs Winstanley. “Who is that lovely girl talking to him? Madame won’t like that, I fancy. I cannot think what Lady Glen-Luna was about to have that Mrs Albany. Just look, too, how elegantly—ex-quisitely she’s dressed; if she means to persuade *me* that her salary paid for all *that*, why, I simply don’t believe it; that plume in her hat alone never cost less than two or three guineas.”

So it had, but it was one her husband

had given her five years ago, for even to the last she had held some sway over the man by no effort of her own—the sway of her beauty—nothing higher or deeper.

“I suspect,” said charitable Mrs Orde, dropping her eyeglass, “that she knew Glen-Luna long before his accident; he was no saint, of course,—young men never are,—and you may depend upon it, down here isn’t the first time madam has sat at his side behind those restive chesnuts! Ugh! don’t tell me.”

Since the good lady was so sensitive, it did not exactly appear what she was not to be told, but as she ceased, she was utterly startled by hearing a sweet voice say behind her, with particular distinctness, to some one,—

“Don’t theologians presume that the Serpent had many legs, Julia? But I think that the horrid vipers about here have two left out of the many, making up the odds with very forked tongues.”

There was a suppressed little laugh in reply, and then Mrs Orde, not daring to turn, saw pass slowly by two young ladies of the Hall party, one, the "lovely girl" who had talked to Douglas.

"Very ordinary specimens, too, dear, of the *anguis scandaloria ruralis*," added Miss Hyacinth, with brows elevated, and wide-open blue eyes of innocence, looking through the "specimen." I don't know whether I've got the Latin order, and all that, correctly, but in the vernacular we call it *back-biters*."

Julia Saltoun's laughter bubbled over at sight of the face a backward glance gave to her view, and Hyacinth, her pretty chin still in the air, her fair cheeks still flushed, said viciously,—

"There! they've had the truth for once, detestable old cats!"

"Oh, Hyacinth! suppose they know Lady Glen-Luna!" whispered Julia.

"Not they, my dear! and, if they do,

still more shame to dare say so much of a lady living under Lady Glen-Luna's roof and protection."

"Quite right, but still—it would be rather awkward for you to meet them."

"They're not Hall visitors, Julia, and if they were I should meet them with unruffled serenity," returned Miss Hyacinth, carrying herself all erect; "it's a good thing Mrs Albany is far too proud and sensible a woman to care a bit for such vile gossips."

"Do you think she knows it, Hyacinth?"

They were moving back towards the carriage.

"Of course she does. She breathes the air, doesn't she, and those creatures fill the air with their scandal; her beauty is her offence."

"They'll set you down as a rude, fast-tongued hussy," laughed Julia.

"Of course, and cut me up too; unless some one tells 'em, 'Oh, that's the heiress,

Miss Lee, of Leesfolly,' and then the rude set down will be, 'Such charming eccentricity, so original; ugh! the toads,' concluded Miss Hyacinth. "Ask Mrs Albany to sing you the parody on the old French chanson. I heard her humming it on Sunday."

"What is it?"

"C'est l'argent, l'argent, l'argent
Qui fait tourner le monde,"

sang Hyacinth—"the original is l'amour; oh dear!"

"What a sigh, Miss Lee."

Gabrielle's rich voice; they had not noticed how near they were to the phaeton. Hyacinth laughed.

"I was quoting your chanson, dear Mrs Albany, and lauding its truth," said she.

"From such a wide personal experience of the world's reverses, of course," said Douglas, with his most wicked look.

"Don't be satirical, sir, or I shall count you as an enemy."

"Then I should remind you of the Italian proverb,—‘ If I have fifty friends, it is not enough ; if I have one enemy, it is too much.’ That is true enough at any rate, *n'est ce pas*, Gabrielle ? ”

"Bitterly true ; but of that Miss Lee can hardly have experience, I hope."

"I certainly don't know of any enemy," said Hyacinth, with a merry laugh. "Mr Glen-Luna used to say I was a daughter of sunshine ; I shall have my share of trouble some day, I suppose. Dr Neville, you are looking down on me just as if I were some curious insect which you expect to see spread butterfly-wings and whirr past your face ; don't be afraid to laugh ; be as wicked as the rest ; I'm used to it."

"Quite a martyr," said Chandos, laughing ; "but, as to the wings, you know that angels as well as butterflies are so provided."

"What a pretty speech ; I feel wings growing, and, like the immortal Miss

Miggs, I shall take an easy flight towards the stars."

"I think the earth would suit you better at present," suggested Mrs Albany, gathering up the ribbons.

"You are not going off the ground yet! Do stop till the stumps are drawn!"

But Gabrielle had detected signs of weariness in Douglas which no one else could—signs she felt rather than saw physically.

"Don't you see how terribly restless my horses are?" she said, smiling; "they have been very good, but they will be almost unmanageable if we keep them much longer. Sister Rose, do come in soon; good-bye, Dr Neville, till to-morrow morning. Harford, please open the gates again."

The chesnuts made a start, almost a bound, forwards, but two strong hands held them in, and, as the carriage swept at speed off the ground out into the open road, there was an absolute little burst of admiration from the men.

“By Jove ! what a splendid whip she is !” exclaimed Percy Rosslyn to Leicester Albany. “What a lucky dog Glen-Luna is. Brandon ; I told you I’d know the Vienna beauty again, and here she is.”

“Don’t lose your heart, my dear fellow,” said the other, with a hardly concealed sneer, “she’s deuced handsome, certainly.”

And he turned away to where Jessie stood flirting with young Fred Saltoun. She knew well enough how to play off against such a man as the *soi-disant* Clifford Brandon.





CHAPTER XI.

SANDS MAKE THE MOUNTAINS.

THE horses quite took up their driver's skill and attention all the way home, and Douglas leaned back very silent and quiet ; so silent and quiet that presently, after glancing at him more than once, Gabrielle said, very anxiously,—

“I am afraid that in saving me you have hurt yourself ; you are in pain !”

How instantly the grave, even stern, contraction of the brow changed, at the mere sound of her voice ! How instantly the smile came to the mobile lips, into the deep grey eyes that met hers !

“Dear Gabrielle, I cannot have you anxious about me ! No harm was done ; I am not in pain ; only rather fatigued. I will keep quiet this evening on my couch, and you must go down to the drawing-room for a pleasant change.”

Pleasant change ! From *his* side to the room in which she must see, hear, breathe the same air as her husband ! The words came like bitter mockery. Douglas saw her set her teeth suddenly ; and she said, looking straight out before her,—

“It would not be a pleasant change for me ! I had rather remain with you !”

He said no more ; said very little during dinner ; nor did Gabrielle. But presently, when he was lying on his sofa, she came and sat down in her little, low easy-chair at his side.

“You may scold me now, if you like, for betraying you this afternoon ! You said you would when you got me alone again !”

“Did I ?” throwing one arm under the

graceful head, and looking up at her with a contented smile. "It may count, then, amongst the dozens of foolish speeches I must have made in my life."

"I have no doubt you have, *mon ami*; so now make a sensible, or, at any rate, a true one!"

"Ah! *tiens-toi*!" said he, laughing. "Are truth and sense, then, on opposite sides of the shield?"

"Well, yes—sometimes! You know, well enough sense may be truth; but truth is not always sense, or sensible."

"*C'est ça belle madame!* What, then, am I to say that contains both?"

"Confess," said Gabrielle, laying her hand lightly on his, "that you did not find the reality as terrible as the shadow. Suddenly, even as I flung you into the vortex, it was the only way to break the barriers, painful as it was."

He prisoned the hand in his own, and his face changed.

“It was for minutes horrible pain. When I saw that you had turned in amongst all those people, I felt as if mentally you had suddenly stabbed me, a dread I cannot express. I could have cried out to you to drive away, away—anywhere out of sight and sound! Truth this, but not sense. Then came that cannon-shot ball, with death to you in it; and every thought, every feeling, every dread but for you was scattered. I only knew that your precious life was in danger! And then there was a shout, and they were all around us. The Rubicon was passed, and—you were still at my side!”

He stopped abruptly. He had lifted himself, speaking almost passionately, the dark eyes glowing, the bronzed cheeks flushed; but he sank back.

“After that, Gabrielle, it all seemed changed—the cloud of dread gone. You had been right when you said that meeting them all again would not be so bad as I in my morbid suffering had feared, only you

forget one thing that made all the difference for me."

"Did I?" Poor heart! Would nothing stop its aching throbs of pain? "What had I forgotten?"

"Your own dear presence—the silent atmosphere of your own intense sympathy that compassed me like an invisible halo," Douglas answered.

"Thank you," the delicate lips quivered. Her low "Thank you" was a little unsteady, for one fleeting second, perfect self-control had almost failed—almost, not quite—her next words were steady.

"They were all so glad to see you amongst them again; their welcome was so cordial, so real, that surely it nearly, if not quite, repaid you for the pain and suffering."

"It was very good of them. It was more than I deserved." He was half absently, as he spoke, passing his fingers over the hand he had taken. "And most of them, as you say, meant it. I think most of them."

His grey eyes were looking dreamily out over the scene that lay without—sky and forest trees and silver river. What was the exception in his mind? Surely the same as hers which pointed unerringly at the one who would fain have seen all that beauty crushed and laid low in the grave. She tried to get at his thought.

“There is an *arrière pensée* in your mind? To whom does it point, *mon ami*?”

There was a quick flash in the dark eyes as the glance came back to her face, but he only laughed slightly and shrugged his shoulders.

“It perhaps might point to more than one and be mistaken after all.”

“You are too keen to be mistaken, or easily deceived,” said his companion, quietly.

“*Mille remerciements*; let me fully return the compliment,” said Glen-Luna, “and I do not, for one, think you need me to point to one there to-day, met for only the second time, whom certainly I do not like, or you

either, and who as certainly does not like me."

She did not move a muscle, or even hold her breath as she said,—

"Who is that?"

"Who! Oh, Gabrielle, Gabrielle, you are a wicked humbug after all! Who should I mean but the man they are nearly all so taken with—Clifford Brandon."

Such a fierce look of scorn and hate flashed for one second into her eyes, and showed itself in the quick movement of her free hand, that it was well those keen eyes near her were drooping under their heavily-fringed lashes.

"I knew you meant him," she said.

"And you agree with me?"

"Yes, to the full."

Before very long Douglas had reason to remember that answer. He moved a little restlessly, a little uneasily, as he often did when anything fretted him.

"I wonder if he is at all in earnest or only flirting with Jessie."

"I cannot say. It might be either, you know," answered Albany's wife, leaning back. "Jessie is — pardon me — herself such an incorrigible coquette that she makes a man flirt ten degrees when he would only perhaps go five."

"She is so terribly like Adeline," said Douglas bitterly. The first time one word the least inimical to his stepmother had passed his lips. "Do you know who introduced Brandon into society, Gabrielle?"

"I fancy," she said, "that it was some one at the Polyglot."

"The Polyglot! rather a mixed club. You know it? Who else?"

"Young Rosslyn knew him, Miss Lee said," added Mrs Albany. "Percy Rosslyn, I mean, and several others, I believe."

"I'll ask Percy about him," said Douglas. "We will go into the drawing-room to-

morrow evening, Gabrielle, if you do not mind."

"Ah, that's my own good boy; it is what Dr Neville and I want, you remember; it will be such a change for you from this suite of rooms."

"In which," said Glen-Luna serenely, "I have been happy enough, as far as outward things can go, ever since May. Here comes Harford."

The door opened and the courier entered.

"If you could spare me for a couple of hours, Mr Douglas, I should like to ride over to Langbourne, as my only sister, Mrs Bevan, is ill."

"Ill! not seriously, I hope, Harford?"

"No, sir, thank you; still she is very unwell, and as I can't go over in the day so well—"

"*Mon cher*, go of course, and take her a basket of grapes, and anything else you think she would like."

“Thank you, sir, you are too kind. I shall not be long.”

“Nay, don’t hurry ; you know we’re late always, and never care how late it is,” answered his master, and Harford retired.

How little one can foresee the future, of even a few weeks ! How little either of those three dreamed the apparently, slight but terrible bearing the illness of this sister was to have on that

Future’s undiscovered land.





CHAPTER XII.

MISTRESS AND MAN.

A CERTAIN dulness fell on the circle remaining after that brilliant equipage had left the cricket ground, and Hyacinth openly protested to Neville and his sister that it was positively too bad of them to go off before the end.

“It’s all those tiresome, restive horses,” said she, “they should have had some more quiet pair, now shouldn’t they, Dr Neville?”

“I don’t think Glen-Luna cares to see ‘quiet’ horses in any carriage he is in, Miss Lee; nor would Mrs Albany by choice care to drive such easy-going quadrupeds. More-

over, this time Glen-Luna had no intention of coming here at all."

"Hadn't he!" Hyacinth's blue eyes opened wide in enlightenment. "I thought they came on purpose to give us such a pleasant surprise."

"Oh no; I fancy that Glen-Luna was as surprised to find himself here as you all were to see him."

"Didn't he wish to come?"

"Indeed, I am only his physician, Miss Lee," said the amused doctor; "I think Mrs Albany could answer you better than I can."

"I daresay she thought the change would do him good," said Hyacinth shrewdly; "do you know, Miss Neville, I have quite fallen in love with her; I don't know what there is about her even beyond her rare beauty—a wonderful charm—something so strangely interesting, partly, perhaps, because in repose it is not a happy face, is it?"

"No, Miss Lee."

“But what a resolute one,” added Hyacinth, with a change of tone; “*ma foi!* she has a will of her own, as much as Mr Glen-Luna himself. Ah, there’s mamma’s voice calling me; I suppose they are going.”

But if Lady Constance had called, it was Lady Glen-Luna who came up, all smiles and sweetness as usual.

“Dr Neville, one moment; I am so anxious about Douglas, for he looked so fatigued! *Do* you think that that catch of the ball has done any harm?”

But Chandos Neville knew the rôle he must play, and was quite equal to her. He answered, with a grave bow,—

“I can hardly tell, madam; I think not, but he was wise to leave.”

“Or rather, so wise of dear Mrs Albany to make him go,” said Adeline, smiling; “she is so devoted to her duty, and takes such good care of our treasure, that really his father and I need have no fear for his welfare. You will see him to-morrow.”

“Oh yes; he is not out of the wood yet, Lady Glen-Luna.”

“Would that he were, Dr Neville. Will you and your sister favour us to-morrow at dinner, and a nice long evening, quite quiet? for we want to coax dear Douglas down, and talk over getting up theatricals.”

The invitation was accepted for more reasons than Lady Glen-Luna dreamed of, and they parted.

Neither had her ladyship the least idea of the watchful eyes that from a quiet vantage point had all that afternoon taken count of her as long as that phaeton was on the ground. If any one had asked her where Harford had been all that time, it is probable that she could not have told the questioner that he had remained mounted at the head of the chesnuts, seeming to take notice of little save for an occasional glance at his master or mistress.

But late that night, after he had attended to the former, he came noiselessly

to the latter's sitting-room, where she was putting away some books before going into her bedroom. She turned as the door closed.

"Well, Harford?"

"Mrs Albany, pardon me; perhaps, placed as you and I are, we are almost over suspicious."

"A fault on the right side," she said, "when the enemy has the vantage ground, and the reptile can bite the very foot that spurns it!"

"Ay, that is true, madam. Well, I wonder who and what this Mr Brandon is that she is so thick with him?"

Gabrielle Albany was standing by the centre table, toying with an ivory paper-knife as he spoke; her hand closed with a sudden convulsive grasp on the ivory, and her white teeth clenched for a moment like a vice.

"I know no more of him than you do, Harford," she said slowly, meeting his gaze

full. She had wonderful power of acting, this woman.

"Is he here after Miss Jessie?" said the courier, half questioning, half in assertion.

"He is credited with being a favoured admirer, if not an actual suitor yet," Mrs Albany said, with a slight restless movement that threw her chiselled features more into shadow—perhaps designedly.

"Reckoning," added Harford with bitter emphasis, "on the master's death making her heiress; they say he's got a fortune, but rich men like to marry rich girls for all that; her mother favours him, that's certain, and that's what I don't like, Mrs Albany."

"Nor I; and yet," she said, looking up into his face again, "I should have thought that Lady Glen-Luna looked for title, more rank, more at least decided position for her daughter, than Mr Brandon can offer."

"Ay, but you see Miss Jessie's been out

two seasons, and not off yet ; she's no great catch while her brother lives."

"She has no fortune, then, beyond a provision ?"

"No, ma'am, nothing to call 'fortune.' The property is all entailed, and Sir Arthur, when he married, made a very handsome settlement, which, of course, Miss Jessie will have—tied up though, beyond any husband's control—and she will have a good dower if she don't marry to displease her people ; but that's all."

"Ah, *c'est ça*, and she and her mother think that this Brandon bird in the hand is worth two in the bush ?"

"Exactly, madam, but then fine plumage don't make the fine bird, does it ?"

Who knew that better than the miserable woman he addressed ?

"No," she said quietly, "but Thomas Carlyle was not far wrong when he said, 'The world is very full of people—mostly fools.' *Eh, bien*, Harford, we must place

this gentleman under our ban also, the more as she takes him up. If we judge a man by his books, we may ten times more judge him by his intimate friends."

With that mistress and man parted, the latter to his sleep, the first to fling herself face downwards on her couch, alone, quite alone, smothering even the wild passionate cry of appeal to Him who heareth the broken hearted.

"How long, O Lord! how long?"





CHAPTER XIII.

CHOOSING THE PARTS.

“**S**HALL we go down to the drawing-room before they leave the dinner-table?”

“Gabrielle, you always think of the exact thing I wish most; you will make me selfish.”

She smiled, and shook her head as she rang for Harford.

“I am not the least afraid of *that, mon ami*.”

“I have not yet discovered anything you are afraid of, morally or physically,” said Douglas, as she wheeled his chair out to the

lift. "I am sure you would stand the truest test for either,"

He might have excepted one thing—her own sorely tried heart; but she only answered lightly,—

"You invest me with qualities which I fear I do not possess to quite such an extent as that; I must be a great hypocrite to have made you think I do."

"I think, though, that Harford agrees with me; don't you, Harford?"

"Certainly, Mr Douglas, if madam will pardon my boldness."

"Oh, you are privileged, I suppose, Harford," she said, smiling; and then the lift reached the hall below where Angus, who had rushed down the wide stone stairs, stood proudly swaying his stately tail, and then contentedly trotted on before the chair in its travels through the wide level corridors to the drawing-room habitually used.

"Angus evidently thinks 'the master' is quite in his right place," said Mrs Albany,

as the collie pushed wide the door with his paw, and wagged round, saying as plainly as spoken language, "Haven't I done a very fine thing in showing my master in here."

"I think he is as pleased to see you shine in society again as I am."

"You are very, very kind Gabrielle."

The few words were said so soberly, with such a grave pathos, that the tears sprang into her eyes, and for a minute she could not have trusted herself to speak quite steadily, then she said gently,—

"Nay, it must needs be the happiness of those who are attached to you to see a step taken which is for your happiness and benefit,"

She always spoke, acted, moved, with the easy, perfectly unembarrassed familiarity of a privileged attendant, nurse, almost sister ; for she knew, felt in the way depths of that true woman's instinct which is so rarely at fault, that in maintaining that graceful familiarity lay her only strength, her

greatest means of holding her position, so singular and even anomalous as it was.

“*Voilà*,” she added, bringing the chair to an anchor by one of the open windows, “this will be the very place for your Majesty to hold your court.”

And at that moment Lady Glen-Luna’s metallic treble was heard without, and in came the ladies.

“Ah, dear Douglas! how good of you to be here already; isn’t it, Lady Constance?”

Lady Constance’s greeting was very genuine; so was Hyacinth’s and Julia’s and Lady Saltoun’s, and, of course, Miss Neville’s; and then, while they were all talking and laughing round his chair, beside which Mrs Albany still remained, the men came in and at once drifted in that direction, attracted by both Douglas and his beautiful companion; all but Mr Clifford Brandon, who, though he, like the rest, came up to pay his devoirs with well-

feigned cordiality, soon drew aside to the outskirts of the group; perhaps he had not exactly relished a look he, and only he, had caught in the dark eyes of that handsome woman, who stood leaning so lightly on the back of the wheeled chair; a look that seemed to warn him to keep his distance despite the sword of Damocles he held over her head.

“And now that we are all together,” began Lady Glen-Luna, in that pretty, bright way of hers which most people found so charming and some few there so insincere, “let us try and settle this theatrical question. Douglas, my dear, I quite rely upon you to help us over all the difficulties.”

“*Tout-à-vous, chère Adeline,*” said Glen-Luna, smiling; “but I don’t see how I can help you much.”

“Oh, you can; you know so much about acting and plays. Doesn’t he now, Mrs Albany?”

"I beg pardon, madam?" Gabrielle had been talking to Sister Rose.

"Why, Douglas knows all about plays and acting, that he can suggest a play and the parts, and—"

"I cry you mercy, Adeline!" interrupted Douglas, with uplifted hands of horror. "Miss Lee, did you ever hear such a base attempt to throw me into such a veritable hornets' nest? *Ma foi!* if I named A and B for leading parts, all the other letters would tear out my eyes."

"We could not spare the bonniest een of all," whispered Sister Rose, with a mischievous twinkle in her own brown eyes.

"*Ah, foi!* I'll owe you for that, Sister Rose," he instantly whispered back, while Hyacinth's laughing retort struck across this by-play,—

"You ought to meekly obey our behests, be the consequences what they may."

"Not much meekness in that quarter, my dear," said his father, with a hearty

laugh; "I'm afraid it's not a Glen-Luna virtue. As to a play, I should think a farce would be best."

"Decidedly," added Douglas, with an aside to Mrs Albany; "they'll probably make a farce of it, anyhow."

But the younger people cried out on the baronet, and Chandos, with a very grave face, suggested "Macbeth," with Miss Lee for Lady Macbeth, the mere idea of which evoked an outburst of merriment.

"I do think you deserve a good box on the ears, Dr Neville," declared Hyacinth, shaking her little fist at him.

"Even a blow from so fair a hand would be welcome, Miss Lee," he answered; and Gabrielle saw a slight frown contract Lady Constance's brows.

Adeline said,—

"You are a saucy girl. Think of some play, please, some of you. Mr Brandon, cannot you?"

"What do you think of Boucicault's

‘Hunted Down?’” said Albany, turning round.

But Douglas dealt that one fatal blow.

“It is not published,” he said; “so, of course, you could not get copies.”

“Oh, it must be printed, Douglas!” exclaimed Jessie, “or how could it have been acted at all?”

“My dear girl, printing isn’t publishing. Plays are often printed only for the owner’s use, or acted from MS. copies. Telegraph to French, in the Strand, and you will find that I am right.”

“Of course you must know,” said Lady Glen-Luna; “we must think of another.”

“Plot and Passion,” suggested young Fred Saltoun.

“Much too tragic,” said his father.

“Too exacting for amateurs,” added Douglas and Neville together. “Try again.”

Several more were named and rejected

for various reasons, and then suddenly Lady Glen-Luna exclaimed,—

“A bright thought! Only a few weeks ago I chanced to see in the library several copies of Stirling Coyne’s play of the ‘Vicar of Wakefield.’ Couldn’t we do that? I remember seeing it played at the Hay-market when I was quite a girl.”

“Capital, mamma,” cried Jessie; and Sir George Saltoun, who was a great “gun” for elderly business in amateur theatricals, said,—

“I think we might manage it as well as any other. Are the copies handy, Lady Glen-Luna?”

“I’ll get them, mayn’t I, please?” exclaimed Hyacinth.

“Thanks, dear; but I know exactly where they are, so—”

Off tripped her little ladyship to the library, and soon returned triumphantly with a little pile of paper-bound copies, which she distributed all round.

“There, look! What do you think, Douglas?”

“*Chère belle-mère*, I am out, of course. I am not going to play.”

“You tiresome fellow! But will it do, dear, do you think?”

“Yes, if you can manage the parts—though this is by no means a good play; not in any way to compare to Wills’s ‘*Olivia*,’ according to the notice I read when it was on at the Court, and according to Mrs Albany’s description of it. This version, for one thing, has followed the tale, and left those two women, Lady Blarney and Skeggs, to tell what Wills has, of course, made one of the most effective scenes—that between Thornhill and *Olivia* when she learns his villainy.

“Couldn’t we alter this version?” said Hyacinth eagerly. “Mr Glen-Luna, I’m sure you could! Cut out those stupid old women here, and write a scene like in

‘Olivia.’ He can cut out Lady Glen-Luna, can’t he?”

“He’s clever enough to do anything,” laughed Adeline, playfully striking his shoulder. “He could cut and write in, and Mrs Albany kindly make us copies. Oh, all so nice if they will!”

Instant chorus of youth.

“Oh do, please; it will be twice as jolly.”

“I’ll do anything possible within my power, ladies, and Mrs Albany’s memory will, I am sure, kindly come to assist me; but you must not expect a reproduction of Wills’s fine scene.”

Chorus—“Oh, it will be splendid! how jolly of you.”

“And for the parts,” added Jessie, “who must be the vicar?”

As if by one movement, every one turned to Sir George Saltoun. Sir Arthur clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“No negatives allowed, Saltoun, you see; vote carried by acclamation. And I fancy,

Neville, that you would do Mr Burchell well."

"You are too flattering, Sir Arthur, but I—"

"No refusal, sir, when I add my request," whispered Lady Glen-Luna, with sweet persuasive impressiveness.

"*Eh bien!*" said the doctor good-naturedly, "I suppose I must not finish the refusal?"

Douglas looked down with an odd little smile hovering on his lips as the thought rose, how very aptly I could cast at least two of the parts. The only woman in the room who could play Olivia was, he knew, the very one whom Adeline would not name, indeed, could not well put before guests, Gabrielle Albany. The other Squire Thornhill, his glance went covertly to the fine imposing form, and swarthy—to him repellant—face of Leicester Albany; but he said nothing, and it was Adeline who turned that way and laid her white hand half-laughingly on his arm.

“It’s a good part in one way, Mr Brandon, and a troublesome one in another; but will you take Squire Thornhill?”

Though the man dared not even glance towards his wife, he knew her thought as well as if it had been spoken, even while he answered Adeline with a low bow,—

“I will do my best with any part you honour me by wishing me to take.”

“Thanks, fifty times; and if you, Mr Saltoun”—Fred bowed assent beforehand—“will play Moses (just your comic part), and Mr Rosslyn take Jenkinson, we can go to the women’s parts, and settle the subordinates afterwards. I think the three girls had better draw lots for Olivia and Sophia.”

Not one there, except Jessie and her mother and Mr Leicester Albany, but would if they could have at once named Mrs Albany, who, talking to gentle Rose, hardly seemed to notice what went on; as it was, there was really no other way for the

hostess to do ; she knew that Jessie would not draw, for that little coquette was too well aware how utterly ridiculous she—who never had been able to act one bit, or repeat ten lines of verse correctly—would make herself in, of all others, such a part, and one in which Clifford Brandon had seen Ellen Terry not so very long ago—not she.

“ I won’t draw, mamma, dear,” said she, stepping back, as if inadvertently, to where Albany stood beside Sir Arthur, “ for if I got it, I couldn’t do it a bit ; it’s not my part *at all*.”

“ You are too modest,” said Albany, bending down, “ or too generous, in giving up.”

She blushed and laughed and denied, feeling she had made a decided “ hit ” in that quarter. Amidst much amusement and speculations the requisite paper, and a dainty Indian card-tray were brought, and, when ready, Lady Glen-Luna begged Douglas to hold it, whereupon Angus, who had watched the cutting and folding the slips of

paper as if the whole was designed for his express benefit, gravely raised himself, with his great paws on his master's knees, pushed his brown nose into the card-tray, gave the hand that held it a loving lick, as if to say, "Please forgive me," and dropped gently to his old position, lying in the chair at Douglas's feet, and keeping watch on Albany if he came near his master or mistress. Dogs are very keen, if all-unconscious, disciples of Lavater.

"Now, maidens fair!" said Glen-Luna.

Laughing they came up, Hyacinth looking saucily in his face as she bent over the tray, and in a tone that only reached his ear,—

"Only Mrs Albany can play this part. I won't."

And she drew one of the folded papers. Julia Saltoun followed. Both opened, and Julia held up hers with an exclamation of fear and dismay.

"It's too absurd; I can't do it a bit! I shall only grieve Olivia and the whole piece."

Do make some one else take this, dear Lady Glen-Luna. Hyacinth will make a capital Sophia; but I've never acted any leading part, and I'm certain I sha'n't remember such a long part or—"

"Nonsense, my dear," said Lady Saltoun; "you mustn't be lazy. I assure you, Lady Glen-Luna, she can act very well."

"I'm sure of that," was the suave answer, and Julia yielded; but while Adeline was assigning Mrs Primrose to Lady Constance and discussing the main points, the young lady—who certainly had little stage conceit—confided to Douglas's private ear that she hoped some one would under study the part.

And that wicked, courtly Douglas was such a hypocrite as to tell her he was sure she would play Olivia to perfection, if she would cast aside all fear of failure.

We must put Truth at the very bottom of her well sometimes—*n'est-ce pas?*



CHAPTER XIV.

CROSS CURRENTS.

“**T**ACT” sounds a very simple, even commonplace, little word ; but what a detestable specimen of creation is the man or woman who totally lacks that quality ! They are like “sweet bells jangled out of tune.” The majority have a fair amount of it ! the minority have that exquisite tact—that rare intensity of subtle sympathy which is in itself a gift, of which Douglas had said to his attendant that hers surrounded him like a halo.

It was so this evening ! She sang, played when asked, took her part in entertaining the guests, as only a graceful, accomplished

woman of the world can do, and overtly gave no more attention to Douglas than belonged to the position in which she stood to him ; but yet he felt, not sentimentally, but in a vague, happy, restful way, that the nameless halo was there about him. If more than once something inadvertent jarred painfully, a turn of the conversation, a chance word perhaps, some extra quick energetic movement of Rosslyn or Saltoun, that forced upon him even more than usual the sad difference between himself and them, he would somehow be sure to meet her dark eyes and see their glance go from himself to Dr Neville with a bright smile that to him said plainly, "Only a little while ! Look forward to the hope held up !" or somehow the conversation was turned ; no one knew how. Almost before he knew himself that his eye was a little weary of this aspect of the room a firm hand touched his chair, and lo ! it was quietly wheeled into quite another position and part of the spacious apartment.

If—and this was more than once—Adeline was fretting and jarring every sensitive chord with effusive attentions and affection, she was sure to be called upon for something for some one ; though that some one could not have definitely said from whence came the suggestion that Lady Glen-Luna sang such a song, or knew the story of that old tower in —shire, of which this was the engraving, and told it so cleverly. She was scarcely beside him herself for five minutes together ; but he felt

Her presence by a spell of might,
Stoop o'er him from above.

It was well on in the evening before Douglas found an opportunity of speaking to Percy Rosslyn ; and then, just after Hyacinth and Mrs Albany had sung one of Rubinstein's exquisite duets, and every one was begging for another, Douglas caught Rosslyn's eye and signed to him.

“Anything I can do for you, old fellow?” asked the young man eagerly.

“Oh no! thanks! It’s only that they tell me Mr Brandon is a friend of yours; and as I didn’t recollect such a name on your list when I was amongst you all, I was conjecturing where you had met him. At the Polyglot, wasn’t it?”

“I think it was first; but I know he was very well introduced there, you know.”

“By whom?” asked Douglas.

“I really forget. An attaché of the Austrian Embassy, I think. He’s one of the Brandons of —shire, and very rich!”

“*Vraiment!*” shrugging his shoulders.

“Plays rather, don’t he, Ross?” This was a random shot on suspicion.

“No; not much, that ever I saw. No; he came in to Aylmer’s a few times; but didn’t play much, and that rather indifferently.”

“Bets high on races, then?”

“He may, perhaps; but, if so, he’s rather dark,” returned Percy, glancing with a merry twinkle to where Albany was decidedly flirting with Jessie. “Oh! you needn’t be afraid; though he is, certainly—pardon me, you know—*épris*. She’s very pretty; and he saved her from being burned, you see! I’m sure you’ll like him! He is liked in society, and certainly he is an admirer of your sister’s!”

“So I see!” said Douglas, rather dryly.

“And every one knows all about him!” added Rosslyn.

“Do they! *C’est bien done mon cher!* Ah! another of those lovely duets, and how well the voices blend!”

“What a glorious creature your friend Mrs Albany is!” said Percy enthusiastically. “If her husband treated her badly, as they said, he deserves hanging; unless he is dead.”

It was clear that Rosslyn had not forgotten the impression made on his fancy by

the beautiful *inconnue* at the Vienna opera-house, eighteen months ago. Gabrielle's face was not one to be easily forgotten, even by a young fellow who generally fell in love and out of it with every change of the moon, as the old song has it. His love was

Like the moon,
Which in the firmament doth run,
And every month is new?

“No; he is not dead!” said Douglas, half amused, half pained; and as he spoke across the disc of his eyes passed the figure of the very man of whom he was so unconsciously speaking. “For Heaven’s sake, my dear boy, take care she never even hears you allude to him. If you have heard anything of the story from my *belle-mère*, you can understand how more than painful it is to Mrs Albany.”

“My dear Glen-Luna, you may rely on me! I’d cut out my tongue before it should wound her, by Jove!”

"I hardly think so severe a sacrifice would be exacted by Hermes!" said the other, with a sort of quiet, good-natured irony.

Percy laughed.

"No; I suppose not. Don't you think this play will be great fun?"

"Very great fun, indeed!"

"You wicked, satirical scamp! Don't you think they'll act well? They're all used to it; at least, I don't know about Cliff Brandon and Dr Neville."

"I dare say they'll do charmingly."

"But you think that Olivia—you agree with Miss Saltoun's own dictum of herself?"

"One should always bow to a lady's opinion, I believe," returned Douglas, playing with his moustache.

"You are incorrigible, Glen-Luna. Of course we all, I suspect, hoped that—well, that Mrs Albany would play it. I'm sure *she* could splendidly! Don't you?"

Another foreign shrug.

"Can't say, *mon cher*. I should think so, from my own intimate knowledge of her; and she has acted a good deal."

"It's very provoking," said Percy, his eyes fixed on the graceful form at the piano. "Well, I suppose it can't be helped! I'll do my best with a small part, as the critics say when they don't know what the deuce to say. You and Mrs Albany will be busy enough over writing in and arranging to-morrow, I suppose?"

"I daresay we shall!"

"It's awfully good-natured of you, Glen-Luna; but it's just like you. Can't I help?"

"Oh no; thanks, dear boy! It's easy enough."

"To you, clever fellow! You always were so handy with your pen; but I couldn't manage at all. But I could copy the new scene you write."

"Thanks, very much; but Mrs Albany

will soon do that, Ross. You will find enough to do in getting up your part."

"I suppose Lady Glen-Luna will get up a grand lot of spectators?" asked Percy.

"Oh, of course! A ball, I daresay; and a hop after the play."

"You will come down, dear old fellow?" said Rosslyn earnestly. "It won't be a bit of fun if you are stuck away, you know!"

Douglas flushed for a moment, at once pained and touched.

"I daresay I shall come down, dear Ross. It's very kind of you all!"

He stopped and bit his lip, man like, proudly crushing even such slight sign of emotion; and then a burst of applause broke across, and Percy turned to add his thanks.

But Leicester Albany muttered fiercely to himself,—“She never sang like that for me since many a year!”

He forgot how many years it was since he had cared to ask her to sing for him, or to

listen when the rich voice poured forth its wealth at the request of others who could better appreciate it than he had ever done. Here jealousy fed on a strange mixture of fear and hate and flashes of base passion !





CHAPTER XV.

THE NEW "OLIVIA."

DOUGLAS GLEN-LUNA and Gabrielle were busy the next day in rearranging the "Vicar of Wakefield." The cutting out of the boys—Will and Dick—necessitated some alteration of the first scene, and one or two others, as did also the disappearance of the women—Blarney and Skeggs. Of course, therefore, Scene second in Act II. came out bodily, and in its place Douglas wrote a scene placed in Squire Thornhill's rooms in town, where he tells Olivia that their marriage was only a sham.

"And she shall give him a blow too," said

Douglas, writing it in the stage directions, "only I'm afraid Miss Saltoun will, as she said, pretty nearly guy the thing. I wish that—"

He arrested the rest on his lips. There was, perhaps, just enough of a resemblance in some points between her own bitter experience and "Olivia's" story to make it a painful part for Gabrielle to play, though, if Lady Glen-Luna had directly asked her, she could hardly have refused.

Just after luncheon Lady Glen-Luna, a rare enough visitor, came up with a little tap-tap and apology for intruding, but Angus, half a minute before, had risen up with an uneasy whine and walked to the door, putting his nose close to the bottom of it.

"The *belle-mère* is coming," Douglas had said quietly; "Angus always tells me if any unaccustomed person is coming, and whether he likes or dislikes them—dear old boy!"

And then enter Adeline, like a pretty

little tiger-cat Gabrielle thought, and wondered if, like herself, he assigned Adeline her likeness in music to that heard by Mendelssohn in the Sistine Chapel, of which he wrote,—

“Mark also the horrible discord of the Papal fifths.”

“Bad boy,” said she playfully, “every one is grumbling at you and Mrs Albany for not appearing one bit all this morning.”

“Firstly, *belle-mère*, I preferred remaining in my own castle; and secondly, look there,” pointing to the folios of MS. before Gabrielle, “how do they think we could get through their play unless we kept to work? Why, Brandon can’t learn the centre-point of the part until it’s written. They ought to be studying their parts instead of calling us hard names.”

“Mrs Albany, you don’t keep him in order; please do make him come down now or this evening.”

“I think not.” Gabrielle glanced up with

something of anxious doubt in her expression. "I must not, you know, have Dr Neville scold me for encouraging over-fatigue."

"You hear my autocrat's order, Adeline!" laughed Douglas. "*N'importe*, we shall meet somewhere in the grounds or park, perhaps to-morrow, or I may take it into my head to inflict myself on you all again in the drawing-room, *quien sabe?*"

"Dear boy! I wish that all inflictions were as delightful as your company," purred Lady Glen-Luna; "don't you, Mrs Albany?"

"Decidedly, madam."

"But you will be present at our play, Douglas; and of course you too, Mrs Albany?"

"*Cela va sans dire n'est-ce pas?*" said Glen-Luna; "when is it to come off?"

"About ten days or a fortnight, dear, I think. I will write at once about the costumes and scenery, and send out my invitations. Sir George will be stage manager

and all that; he's capital at all that, and has told them that they must all have a first rehearsal in three days, so they're all learning their parts as hard as they can."

"Will Neville be able to come?"

"I sent a note down this morning to ask him to name his time, and he wrote back that his evenings were free unless he should happen to be sent for, which was not very likely, as the country is so different to a London practice. Ta, ta, now; I only came to tell you these things, so I'll run off to my letters."

And away she went, much to the relief both of Glen-Luna and his attendant.

All they had undertaken to do was given in complete the next morning, and the getting up of the play went on briskly amongst the other amusements; only Julia Saltoun found hers a task, and secretly felt very much afraid she should make a fiasco.

Douglas kept rather aloof, as he had been used to do; during the ten or twelve days

that followed, for all the talk and interest begun and ended, he said, with the play and ball, which all bored fearfully, and it suited Gabrielle's plan of strategy, because it gave and enabled her to give Lady Glen-Luna still more the conviction that this fling into society was really harmful to the heir of Glen-Luna ; exactly this belief clever Mrs Albany wished to produce. In the grounds, and more than once out driving, they met ; once or twice, too, Douglas came down to the drawing-room in that ten days, but that was all. Dr Neville said nothing ; he knew well that in Gabrielle's hands all was right. The last rehearsal of the play was fixed for the morning of the day before the ball, and while the " company " retired to one of the many sitting-rooms, Glen-Luna, Gabrielle, and Sister Rose, who had walked up with Chandos, betook themselves to a favourite nook at the bottom of the lawn, where there was a garden chair for the elder lady, the younger taking her more

usual seat on the foot of the wheeled chair, with two or three volumes from which to select readings, and Angus speedily curling himself on her robe; the warm air was laden with the scent of flowers, the lazy hum of insects, and the ripple of the river, deepening rather than breaking the stillness of the cloudless August morning, and now and again the sound of voice and splash of oars came to their ears; then there was a restless movement, a quick, pained contraction of the brows in Douglas that did not escape Gabrielle; and then she saw him look at his hands, those delicate chiselled hands that yet had such nervous strength.

"Yes," she said, quietly, exactly as if his bitter thought had been spoken—as it had to her—"those hands will hold oars again as well as ever they did. Don't you feel—think—how different you are to what you were?"

"I think," he said, perhaps to hide deep emotion, "that you are a magician, and

Neville another; are they not, Sister Rose?"

"I hope they will prove so, my dear," answered Sister Rose, looking up with her beaming smile; "magic has changed character in these days, but not died out."

"No, not died out," Douglas repeated softly, half to himself, and a dreamy look came into the large grey eyes, as if they saw something afar off beyond the range of physical vision! perhaps they did, a wild, mad dream of a future that could never be, the woman he loved, free, and by his side, his own for ever. He actually started with an impatient frown at the sudden sound of voices approaching, and turned his head quickly.

"Why, it is the company! What is the matter? A break down! Adeline, too!"

Yes, so it was; nearly all talking, laughing, and yet with dismayed looks, bearing straight down on the trio, whose repose they at once scattered to the air.

"Now, remember girls," Lady Glen-Luna said, as they neared them, "one at a time, or we shall frighten them; if I am to ask, I'll speak first."

"What is the matter, *belle-mère*?" asked Douglas; but he noticed that, though Julia looked flushed and "odd," Hyacinth and the others looked more expectant and triumphant than anything else.

"Why, my dear, this naughty, naughty Julia has fairly struck her colours at rehearsal, and says—"

"I broke down," said Julia; "I knew I shouldn't do it; I said so from the first. I'm awfully sorry to vex anybody, but I had better give up at once for a better substitute than break down in the play. I can't do 'Olivia!' Do take my part, Mr Glen-Luna, and say honestly that you know I'm right."

"I'll say anything a lady commands, Miss Saltoun; you are quite right."

"Hear, hear," cried Julia, tossing up her

hat, "and I'm sure Mr Brandon really endorses it, for he plays capitally, and ought to have a good 'Olivia.' I beg your pardon, dear Lady Glen-Luna, for interrupting your mission, but I wanted some support."

Adeline wore her sweetest smile—she only had one or two—and most pretty, playful manner, as she said,—

"It is too bad to ask anybody to take up a rôle like that at such a few hours' notice, and I should have telegraphed to Blackmore for some actress, but by general vote and acclamation I was at once entreated and deputed to petition a lady of whose dramatic gifts I was only then made aware." She turned now with charming *insouciance* and entreaty to Gabrielle, "Dear Mrs Albany, you will not refuse to play 'Olivia' for us? They tell me you are so clever an actress, and so used to it. My dear girl you won't refuse?"

Refuse! how should she *not* refuse? What! play "Olivia" to that man's

"Thornhill" of all men born!—play so nearly in fiction the story he had made her play so terribly in fact; the man who had sworn he would repudiate her as wife and claim her as mistress! But for the sake of the man at whose feet she sat she must have followed the passionate impulse of the moment, and stood up in their midst to point her denouncing hand at their favoured guest and tell them why she refused their petition. All this flashed like lightning through heart and brain, and Douglas alone felt, what her husband knew, that she would fain refuse.

"It is such short notice, Lady Glen-Luna," she said, and if the colourless cheek grew a shade pallid, it was the only outward sigh that mastered self-control. "I am so sorry, but I am afraid you must excuse me. I could in no way," and only Albany felt the hidden irony, "play up to Mr Brandon's 'Thornhill.'"

"Mrs Albany, indeed you must not

refuse us!" exclaimed Adeline, now really in despair, and for once, therefore, with all the force of earnestness; and Sir George Saltoun and the others came up with such a chorus of beseeching and protestations that Douglas interfered, half in jest, half in earnest.

"*Ma foi, mes amis*, but I must protect Mrs Albany from your desperate attack; are you not rather putting both her powers and good nature to a severe test?"

"Oh no, no." Adeline clasped her white hands with prettiest entreaty. "Don't listen to your wicked defender, dear Mrs Albany, but come to our rescue only in pity for my position as hostess. I know you have acted and recited, for Mr Brandon told me just now that you told him you had studied, and so I'm sure you can get up 'Olivia' between this and to-morrow. If you would only say you will do your best with the part I shall take it as a personal favour."

How could she still refuse without the fear, the extreme likelihood, of rousing some suspicion of other reasons in Glen-Luna's quick brain which might be dangerous? She yielded gracefully, with a low bow.

"It is impossible to refuse that which your ladyship makes a personal request. I will do my best with 'Olivia,' and you will all perhaps pardon defects?"

"We shall first have to discover them, madam," said Leicester, bending low, and as she turned their eyes met for one second; his, full of bold admiration and insolent triumph—in hers, haughty scorn, defiance, warning. Then she laughed slightly, shrugging her shoulders.

"Eh bien, monsieur; nous verrons."

And then Lady Glen-Luna came in with effusive thanks. Douglas again came to her rescue.

"Miss Saltoun, if you would kindly let Mrs Albany have your copy of the 'Vicar'

she would perhaps like to commence her task without delay, so as to be ready, if possible, for one stage rehearsal to-morrow. I can be of some help to her, I think."

"Oh, but *you* need not desert us too, dear," said Adeline.

"Thanks ; but I had rather be quiet to-day," said Douglas, lazily drooping his dark head back against the cushions, "if you will all kindly excuse me ?"

"I suppose we must," said Hyacinth ruefully, as the relieved and delighted Julia gave her play-book to the new "Olivia," whispering eagerly,—

"You're just the very one we all secretly wanted to play it from the first, Mrs Albany."

Which was true ; but it was very far from what Mrs Albany herself wished. Circumstances had for the second time in a fortnight beaten her back and conquered her, giving the vantage ground to her husband.

Then Chandos Neville and his sister said they must take leave, and the younger people declared they would walk with them to the park gates, while Sir George Saltoun and Lady Glen-Luna returned to the house, and with a deep drawn breath of relief Gabrielle Albany found herself once more alone with Douglas Glen-Luna.





CHAPTER XVI.

CRUMBLING BENEATH THEIR FEET.

IN copying the play as rearranged, and looking through it, Gabrielle had, in fact, pretty well got letter-perfect before this, and her own rare facility of memory made the committal of "Olivia's" part an easy task at any time, as Douglas very well knew ; and he ascribed her reluctance to assume that rôle to the dislike she felt for Clifford Brandon, and still more to play a part which in so many points resembled her own sorrowful story, and must therefore be deeply painful.

"There—I know it!" she said about a couple of hours later, almost flinging the

little book on the grass, to Angus's great surprise. "I have neglected you long enough. Let me read to you, *mon ami*, or recite one or two of your favourites," drawing from his hands the volume he had been quietly reading all this time.

"Indeed, my dear Gabrielle, you shall not tire yourself for me, though your splendid reciting is always such a treat. You have studied elocution under both Regnier and Salvini, and I have often wondered why you did not go in for reciting instead of going to old Professor Merton. You have every advantage, both as a public and drawing-room reader."

"Except money," said Gabrielle, shaking her head with a half sad smile, "and interest."

"Ah, *peste*!—there it always is," said Douglas, with an impatient movement; "what a frightful amount of talent and genius is lost or hidden for want of that!"

She dropped her hand and said, playing with the collie's long, silky ears,—

“ I shall, if possible, try it whenever I leave here ; but, you see, when I fled to England I was utterly friendless — ay, worse, worse than friendless, as well as poor, and the lawsuit swept up all I had brought. I was in the worst possible position for trying to get into — certainly drawing-room recitations, as you can at once see, and I had no money to live upon, or dress upon, while I was trying. No interest—no introduction of any sort. I had been, save for one or two flying visits, out of England for seven years ; I was practically a stranger and a foreigner. Moreover, I was not then equal to the wear and tear of a struggling professional life ; I was like a more than half-wrecked vessel flung on a lee-shore. The garish whirl of the terrible life I had lived, ending so fearfully as it did, had for a time shattered my powers, and for months after I left Leicester Albany

I could not, I know, have borne the sight or sounds of a ball-room ; nothing but quiet and rest. The situation which, by a lucky chance, my lawyer got me was a very godsend ; it was a harbour of refuge after the wild tempest, and I was strong, quite strong, long before I was again cast adrift."

The rich, soft voice, with its strange pathos and suppressed passion, ceased for a moment ; then she added, very low, bending yet a little more over Angus,—

"And now, for a time, I have found a home."

"Gabrielle, Gabrielle ! I would to Heaven I could free you, be the cost to me what it might !"

The passionate force of the man — ay, something deeper than either—startled her for a moment, as the flash of lightning lights up the whole canopy of Heaven, and the blood rushed wildly back on her heart.

"Hush, oh, hush !" she said under her

breath ; “ I would not, if I could, take freedom at the least cost to you. Forgive me ; I hardly know how it was—I never meant to say so much. I have no right, and, Heaven knows, would never pain or wound you for one moment.”

“ The wound to me, Gabrielle, is because it is first yours.” He had mastered himself—so nearly self-betrayed—once more. “ Promise me that you will treat me still, ever, as your friend, to whom you can speak as you will, and find deepest, truest sympathy. Nay, no answer in words,” for he saw how her lips were quivering ; “ only put your hand in mine, and I am answered.”

Such a delicate, beautiful hand ! She looked up as she laid it in his, and that touch of hand to hand struck one chord that went straight from heart to heart. He lifted that hand to his lips—gravely, reverentially, and dropped it in silence. Unconsciously in each of these two brave

hearts, so very near, so terribly separated, Lovelace's noble sentiment still held paramount sway—

“I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more.”





CHAPTER XVII.

THE BALL—THE PLAY.

LADY GLEN-LUNA had certainly signally won the first move in her evil game, though she could only guess its probability, not know it for a fact. Still her ladyship felt perfectly satisfied of one thing, that whether or no Douglas actually loved Gabrielle Albany, and she deemed it was hardly possible he could be heart-free after having her nearly three months with him, she had no cause to fear Hyacinth Lee; she had no chance against such a rival as Mrs Albany were she to wish it and try twenty times to win him. The only one thing she had to dread

was the death of Mrs Albany's husband ; but for that chance.

“Bah !” muttered her ladyship ; “M. le Diable takes care of his own, and men like that always live long, just because their wives want them to be dead. As for Hyacinth—she is four-and-twenty, and if she did *not* care for Douglas, why on earth hasn't she married ? Poor Lady Constance ; that girl will take the bit between her teeth yet, and marry some one without title, money, or any particular position ; only in her way she flirts and favours all round, that it's hard to tell which she likes best or flirts with most—Brandon, Rosslyn, Douglas, or Dr Neville. *He* admires her, I'm sure, and I am very glad she plays Sophia to his Burchell. Lady Constance don't like it, I can see ; but that's all the better, for if Hyacinth would only fall in love I should be absolutely safe as long as Douglas lives, as long—”

She stopped, and walking up to the long,

cheval glass in her dressing-room, surveyed her own pretty *petite* figure and face in it, smiled in two or three different ways at herself, tried a look of horror, of surprise, of sorrow, and then one of gentle sadness.

“So that will do, I fancy. I wish I had more courage; I could soon end it, I think; but then—then, the least suspicion would be fatal. I must try easy, natural measures still.”

What was the woman speaking, thinking of? Harford had said to Mrs Albany of her, “Do you know what a little devil she is?” Both of those two, who loved Douglas Glen-Luna, might well have shivered at the face looking at itself in the glass. Ah, if it had but been a magic mirror, such as in fairy tales you see coming events reflected as unerringly as the Highlander’s second sight forewarns him of danger.

Then she suddenly clenched her hands and stamped her foot in a paroxysm of impotent rage.

“Why didn’t the accident do its work better? Why did it leave me all to finish at such risk? Why does he linger on—linger on, as if his wrecked life was worth his having? And, good Heaven—that this frail life should be all that stands between my child and such a splendid inheritance! It shall not! Oh, if I had only one safe confederate, whose whole interest went with mine! Ha!”

What thought had struck her that the exclamation escaped her with such a flash in the steel grey eyes, that made them glitter like a serpent’s? What thought made the lips compress into such a thin, sinister line as she left the room? Five minutes later she was smiling, laughing, at luncheon, the most affable, lively, best of hostesses.

“Two-faced girl make bad squaw,” say the North American Indians.

The unusually spacious and magnificent suite of reception-rooms at Luna Hall were

the admiration, and perhaps secret envy, of the county, and the hostess entering them first before she retired to dress, had reason to feel satisfied with the tasteful beauty and perfection of light and colour. The third room of the suite it was which had long ago been altered and arranged for use either for music or theatricals, had now easily been converted into a very convenient bijou theatre, under the auspices of the men sent from London to take charge of the scene-shifting and the necessary "business." Stage, wings, exits, place for the band, and rows upon rows of stalls were all there.

The guests had been invited to come punctually at half-past seven, as the play began at eight, and dancing about ten or half-past, and no one was likely to be late.

Chandos Neville and Rose had, by Douglas's request, come in time to dine with him and Gabrielle, and, as before, they descended before any one arrived, and in fact entered the grand *salon* by one door as Lady Glen-

Luna and Hyacinth Lee came in by another, followed at the respectful length of their trains by Leicester Albany. The man almost started as his bold glance fell on his most beautiful wife, who looked simply superb in her graceful robe of white cashmere and falling lace, with crimson sash and plain gold ornaments, and one white rose nestling amidst the rich, dark masses of her short, curling hair,—and a fierce thrill of jealousy shook him as Douglas said something to her. Moving in haughty endurance amongst the *roués* with whom he had surrounded her, in all the rich panoply of gleaming satin and flashing jewels, she had never looked more beautiful than now. He felt a savage rush of triumph that, scorn him, shrink from his mere touch as she might, she must this night, if only in a play, only in her character of actress, tell him she loved him, and yield herself to the clasp of arms which to her was pollution. Jessie, tripping in all prettiness and blue

and cloudy white, would perhaps have hardly liked it if she could have read what was passing in his mind. Then came in Hyacinth, and her bright eyes were brighter still as she greeted Chandos Neville, and then Rose, and whispered enthusiastically to her,—

“Doesn’t Mrs Albany look exquisite?—just like a picture?”

“She always does, my dear,” answered Sister Rose, smiling.

But now carriages were heard, and the guests arrived quickly from far and near—for no one had declined—and before eight the *salon* was well filled: Adeline never crowded her rooms. At ten minutes to eight the actors disappeared, and Miss Neville, with a smiling, “I shall shelter under your wing amongst so many strangers,” took Gabrielle’s vacated seat.

But the moment Lady Glen-Luna gave the signal for the company to move to the theatre, Harford, who had waited near the

door, came quietly in and stood behind his master's chair till every one was seated, and then wheeled his chair up just behind the last row of seats, just near Miss Neville. Beyond that again stood the whole retinue of servants, for each *salon* opened into the other by a wide archway; Harford, of course, quite *en règle*, stood near Douglas.

In the midst of the lively buzz of tongues—and certainly Douglas kept those near him amused enough—and consulting of the dainty-scented programmes, the band struck up Boccherini's charming and quaint minuet for strings, and presently the bell tinkled, and up rolled the curtain discovering the first scene, and before it had gone far it did not need such a critical judgment as Glen-Luna's to see that Mrs Albany, despite the short notice she had had, not only knew her stage business well and was used to acting, but was *de naturel* an actress, more as the play went on, and all acted fairly well; it was evident that she had the rare gift of

throwing her own power into others, and bringing out their best means—of forcing them nearer to her own level. Albany remembered that power of hers of old, when quite in the earlier days of their marriage he had acted with her in private theatricals.

His own first appearance with Jenkinson gained much applause ; but the interest of the audience became really thoroughly aroused by Olivia in the scene where her lover is trying, and only too successfully, to persuade her to fly with him. Was it only the bitter memory of such a similar scene in her own life that threw such an intensity of passion and pathos into her acting—such a reality into the look, at once so searching and so full of doubt, which she fixed on his face at his first words, “Nay, dearest Olivia ; these scruples betray a doubt of my affection and my honour” ? a look that made the man who had flung her away on a cast of the dice wince and shrink, brazen as he was. Who there, save him,

had the secret? Who there guessed the literal truth of the last two words of Thornhill's speech, "Think only of our future felicity. Come, Olivia?" He threw one strong arm round the slight form, and drew her close to him, with a flash of cruel triumph in his black eyes, "My joy! my pride! *my wife!*"

"Richard! Richard! my destiny is in your hands!"

And then she was hurried from the stage amidst a burst of applause. Douglas alone said nothing. There was a deep, strange sense of pain all through, which he could not shake off; a vague knowledge that it was all pain to her; an impression—perception rather—that purposely or not she had thrown a new reading into Olivia, an underlying of doubt of Thornhill all through in the girl's mind, even when her heart yielded. She had not "gagged" in one word; but it was in the intonation of the flexile voice, he wonderful facial action, the movement

that seemed to shrink—to shiver even when, wrapped by his arm, her head had dropped on his shoulder. How could Douglas guess how real that shiver had been?

Then the act-drop fell on the first act, and every one began talking; and Lady Glen-Luna was complimented to the top of her bent on the excellence of her dramatic company and the “get-up” of the play.

“Mr Brandon is capital, and so are Dr Neville and Miss Lee,” said one lady, fanning herself; “and your friend, Mrs Albany, is simply exquisite; isn’t she, Miss Glen-Luna? It is no wonder Thornhill should fall in love with such an Olivia.”

Which remark Jessie did not like.

“I think she over-acted just a little,” said she; “don’t you, Lady Saltoun?”

Lady Saltoun, who was a very good judge of acting, looked a little amused.

“I’m afraid, my dear, I must entirely

differ with you. Mrs Albany's impersonation is superb. What is the next scene?" glancing at her programme. "Winter Scene—Vicar's cottage after being burnt down. Ah, and after that the scene you have put in, Mr Glen-Luna."

He bowed.

"I am afraid, Lady Saltoun, that the scene left to itself would be disappointing; but I feel sure that wherever I have failed Mrs Albany will fill up the deficiency."

"I don't think you will have left her much room or need for 'gag,'" returned the lady, laughing; "I am all on the *qui vive* for the scene. I am glad you have refined Thornhill a little, as in Wills's charming Olivia, for in this version his brutal villainy and sudden repentance are too absurd."

"So I thought, Lady Saltoun, and Mr Brandon quite follows my idea. He is really playing very well, though I think

Mrs Albany is to a great extent answerable for that."

"I think so too. Ah, there is the curtain for this front scene. Poor Mrs Primrose, and what a lovely Sophia Miss Lee does make!"

"And," thought Douglas, "how very well Neville plays lover—better, I suspect, than Mamma Lee quite likes." The thought ended in a suppressed sigh, and a restless lift of the head that made watchful Harford, standing behind him, stoop a little and whisper in German if he were tired and would like to move.

"*Nein, mein freund,*" and the bright smile reassured the faithful attendant.

There was a general settling of expectation and excitement when, after a rather longer wait than the others had been, the curtain rose, and discovered a handsome apartment in London, with Richard Thornhill seated at a table, and Olivia, richly robed now, pacing to and fro. Douglas

lifted himself from his half recumbent attitude of languid indifference, almost startled by something he felt, rather than saw, in her face, or heard in the ring of her voice. You might, indeed, have heard a pin fall, or a breath drawn, in those few seconds before the actress broke the stillness. She is asking that her father should be told that she is wedded; it is half a prayer, half a demand. He looks into the beautiful face, and shakes his head, refusing her with words of endearment, with half-a-dozen plausible reasons why he cannot, dare not yet, own her publicly. She stands for a moment gazing on him as if she could scarce have heard aright, and then she is kneeling at his feet, appealing to the "love he has professed for her," pleading for justice, only common justice, with such anguish, such wild pathos, that the tears started to many an eye. Thornhill half covers his face with one hand, and puts the other out to draw her to him; but still refuses, with some sign, as she

shrinks from his touch, of vexation and rising temper. Olivia springs to her feet, and, as he rises, quickly faces him with flashing eyes and haughty mien. She stoops no more to plead; she tells him she will no longer break her father's heart by leaving him to believe her honour lost; will no longer hear the whisper, the breath of shame, she feels in those about her even now; swears that she will write home, or go herself, if he still refuses to do her justice, and turns to leave him.

Breathless the audience watch as Thornhill steps forward in her path, and, with a cold, cruel sneer that is no acting in this man, tells her to learn the truth, and then leave him if she can or dare; tells her that the priest was a sham, the marriage a mockery, and she, in all her proud beauty, only Richard Thornhill's mistress — not wedded wife.

There is a dead pause; this woman's acting all through has been so powerful, so

terribly real, that it grows now almost too painful as they watch the awful change that comes into the beautiful, deathlike face, to which one hand is slowly lifted for a moment, as if this thunderbolt at her feet had dazed her senses ; dread, horror, agony, a hoarse whisper between the white lips.

“ Holy Heaven above ! it *cannot* be true —not wedded ! only your mistress ! ”

Then the scathing scorn and fierce passion and agony of the woman break forth like a wild torrent, before which the would-be betrayer shrinks, almost for a minute covers (*this* is no acting in Leicester Albany), but still cannot resist yet another sneer, another bit of taunt. It is too much. With one fierce word, “ Coward ! ” on her lips, she lifts her clenched hand and strikes him once on the breast, no play blow, lacking in passion or force, strikes him with a passionate force that, prepared as he is, and powerful man as he is, he staggers slightly and gives back a step.

“ By Heaven ! Olivia, but I love thee

more madly than ever, and will not let thee escape me !”

But Olivia is too quick. As the blow is given she turns and flees, and the act-drop falls. A minute’s pause, as if the audience were regaining breath, and then long and loud the applause broke forth with calls for Brandon and Mrs Albany.

Douglas leaned back again as they came before the curtain, but he noticed how pale and even exhausted Gabrielle looked, though the chiselled lips were half smiling as she bent low to the enthusiastic audience, and retired, not before she had met Glen-Luna’s glance with a deepening smile that reached the beautiful eyes this time.

“ Splendidly acted ! ” exclaimed Sir Arthur, and Lady Saltoun asked aloud of Adeline,—

“ Didn’t I hear some one say that some one—Mr Brandon, I think—was sure she is the same lady he heard recite at some charity affair in America some few years ago ? ”

“ I think it was,” blandly answered

Adeline, delighted to find she had got hold in her house of a "draw" so unexpectedly, and in no way afraid that any consideration of money would suffice to lure Gabrielle Albany from her charge of Douglas. "Perhaps, if that is so, we can get her to give us a recitation presently. Douglas will know, of course."

"The curtain rose again on the Inn, where the Vicar finds his miserable daughter; and the interest of the spectators was kept up till the fall, especially when Thornhill once more comes on the scene. Nor did the interest flag for one moment on to the end, when the curtain fell on the pretty tableau grouped on the stage. Then there came the enthusiastic applause and recalls of the principal artists.

"But it is certainly that very clever, very handsome Mrs Albany who has carried it through so splendidly," whispered Lady Saltoun to Douglas Glen-Luna.

So she had; but even Douglas knew only the half of what had tried her so terribly in this play.



CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BALL : A BUTTERFLY SINGES ITS WINGS.

AND then came all the buzz of tongues, commenting, criticising, talking as the guests filtered into the centre *salon* or passed into the banqueting hall opposite, where refreshments were laid out. When the "theatre company" made their reappearance in their own *costumes de bal*, Gabrielle Albany saw that Douglas was back again in the place where she had left him—near an open window—but it was some minutes before she could escape gracefully the "lionising" that greeted her entrance and gain his side.

“Are you tired, *mon ami*, with having to sit out all that tiresome amateur acting of ours?”

“No; they all did it well, especially Neville and Brandon; you made them. I was only so pained, Gabrielle, because I knew—felt, how it tried you; *your* acting was *magnifique*! Real. I fancy you rather startled Brandon once or twice.”

She knew she had—who better?—and drew a little back, with a slight laugh and shrug of the shoulders.

“*Ma foi*! perhaps I did, but I could not help that, you know. Here they all come.”

A number of them; Albany’s deep voice bandying jest and compliments to Hyacinth, which made her laugh and colour, too, even while she saucily retorted,—

“I think it was Mrs Albany who made us all do our best; compliment your fair Olivia, Squire Thornhill, or her powerful acting.”

“Powerful, indeed!” laughed Leicester,

turning with a bow to his beautiful wife. "You did not spare me, Mrs Albany; it was no half-hearted touch, but a real hard blow, you gave me."

She let her eyes meet his, and said lightly, with a half laugh that veiled to others—not him—the *double entendre* of her retort,—

"You are quite strong enough to bear it, Mr Brandon. I do not think I succeeded in hurting or wounding you very much."

"Madam, I had rather only a blow from a fair hand than the heart stab from bright eyes."

He avoided the glance of hers, and turned to Jessie, taking up her ball carte, as the band was now heard; and there was a general brightening up and movement to claim or secure partners.

"Mine, this at least, Miss Lee," said Chandos Neville, and the soft colour on her cheek deepened slightly, and the bright

eyes were brighter still as she gave him her hand.

"Mrs Albany, you promised me the first and I don't know how many waltzes," said Percy Rosslyn eagerly.

"Your inventive powers are large, Mr Rosslyn," said Gabrielle, smiling, "for I do not think I gave any promise at all, as I did not contemplate dancing."

"Then," said Douglas very gravely, "the sooner you not only contemplate but enact it the better. I want to see you. I am certain you dance like a fairy, and Rosslyn used to be a good waltzer."

"Not like you though, old fellow," said Percy. "You used to—"

Gabrielle's hand clasped his arm; Gabrielle's rich tones interrupted him.

"Come, then; they are all in the maze already."

Glen-Luna's eyes followed that slight, white-robed form, which to him was all in the world, but the sigh was smothered back

on the heavy heart, while the handsome face and smiling lip turned to Lady Constance and Miss Neville, who came up—"their dancing days were done," they said.

Lady Glen-Luna's, however, clearly were not, for she whirled past them with Sir George Saltoun; dignified Lady Constance looked after them—met Douglas's amused and entirely comprehending smile, and answered it frankly.

"Yes, of course, she is so very different—quite exceptional. Her four or five-and-forty years are simply numerical, because she was born that number of years ago! but she is so small and dainty and pretty, so ever bright and youthful, that to see her a wallflower would look quite as odd as to see me dancing. Ah, Sir Arthur," smilingly tapping the baronet with her fan as he came up.

"Hum," said he, meaningly; "I think 'Sir Arthur' is wanted indeed, when he

finds his wicked boy flirting with two such charming ladies."

"So you have come to help me, father ; but I cannot resign either, even to you ! How voice and eyes spoke of the strong affection that bound father and son ! What a wealth of love the sister and stepmother had trampled under foot. The thought crossed Rose Neville, and her glance went instinctively in search of Jessie and her swarthy partner, but she missed them from the throng of dancers ; so did one other, the man's wife, and the firm, delicate lips closed suddenly over the small white teeth. Great heavens ! did he dare to think that she would stand calmly by and basely suffer him to betray the honour of the noble house that sheltered her, of the one man who held her very heart, to whom every tie of love and gratitude and duty bound her ? She might, perhaps, in her terrible position, be forced to let it go on to the very last point for the sake of the one

being whose whole future—ay, and life—depended on her. The retort that would brand her so cruelly, so falsely, she absolutely set at nought save for the effect it might, even must have on her position; but she knew too well the desperate man with whom she was dealing, knew the not less desperate and ruthless character of the woman with whom she was silently warring—foresaw that eventually those two must draw together in one fearful interest, as inevitably as the needle is drawn by the magnet, and knew that when that time came the battle would be deadly indeed.

What a miserable mockery the gay dance, music, and glittering crowd were to such a heavy heart as hers! Escape she could not; even to remain unnoticed and unsought was equally impossible. The consideration, the position, which the family accorded to Douglas Glen-Luna's secretary, her success as Olivia, and, above all, her own rare beauty and gifts, made her an

object of attraction, the more so because, being already married, the men felt that they could flirt in safety! and the mammas felt that she could not cross the paths of their daughters, practically, at any rate.

Meanwhile Jessie had really turned a little giddy, and, true couquette, made the most of it. Albany drew her outside on to the terrace, still keeping his arm about her.

“So are you better, little fairy?” he half whispered, stooping to look into the blushing face, “the room got hot, and this is so cool, so lovely”—he was leading her past the windows, down into the gardens — “especially with such a witch for a companion.”

“I wonder how many times you have said the same thing to others?” laughed Jessie. “Please take me back to mamma, and”—with a pout—“keep your pretty speeches for more appreciative ears.”

“Cruel fairy! for whom should Clifford Brandon keep them, save—”

“Why, Hyacinth Lee, or handsome Mrs Albany,” said Jessie, carelessly pulling a flower to pieces; but Albany detected the jealous ring in her tone, and knew that with her the “game” was won.

“I prefer jessamine to hyacinths infinitely,” said he coolly; “and all Mrs Albany’s beauty is as nought to me.” Then, with an abrupt change of manner, he clasped her hands and bent down.

“Jessie! Jessie! forgive me if I am too bold, have hoped too much, so much older than you as I am; but you must have read—guessed—that I love you, that I have loved you from the hour I held you senseless in my arms. Jessie, dearest, can you learn to love me?”

And, while the foolish, sentimental girl whispered that she loved him already, and listened to his vows, promising to keep all secret till he chose to speak to her parents, she little dreamed the dangerous ground on which she stood—little dreamed, poor fool,

that the only hand that could pluck her back from the gulf was that of her lover's wedded wife.

The butterfly had singed its wings ; would it quite burn them ?

When they re-entered the ballroom the band was playing the charming overture to "Guillaume Tell," while the guests promenaded or rested, chatted, and flirted. In such an interval Douglas was, of course, the centre of a group, but his quick eye, for all that, saw the pair re-enter as readily as he had missed them, and Neville, who was standing near him, laughing at Hyacinth's sallies, levelled right and left, and met by Glen-Luna's or Gabrielle's witty repartee noticed a slight, very slight, momentary shadow cross the broad, fine brow as Albany brought Jessie back to her mother, who had just come up, all smiles, of course, but with "request" in every line.

"A petition," she cried gaily, "made by ever so many. Dear Mrs Albany, will you

be very goodnatured and give us a recitation? You can't plead incapability after your acting Olivia as you did; besides, even if Douglas won't betray you, Mr Brandon has let the cat out of the bag, for he says he is sure it is you he heard once in New York recite for a charity."

"And Mrs Albany is not easily mistaken," Leicester added, with a low bow that made the remark a compliment.

The haughty woman to whom his feigned homage was only insult, and she well knew meant insolence, seemed not even to have heard him, but answered Adeline,—

"I fear, Lady Glen-Luna, that I should disappoint you all, for, except for Mr Glen-Luna, I have not recited for two or three years."

There was a murmur of protest, and Sir Arthur exclaimed,—

"Do your best, my dear, if it is not asking too much; and if we're not pleased, I'm sure it will be our fault alone!"

"You are very kind to put it so, Sir Arthur. Well, I will do my best."

She drew off her gloves, handed them with her bouquet to Douglas in a quiet, matter-of-course way, as if he had been her brother, and drew back to the centre of the spacious *salon*, all grace, ease, perfect self-possession, not a shadow of self-consciousness in one look or movement. So beyond measure beautiful, standing there literally, as she did metaphorically, alone before them all, that for a minute a rush of intolerable pain went through the heart of the man who loved her so deeply, so without even the right of hope. Then her rich, ever pathetic voice broke the hush of expectation.

"What shall it be? Grave or gay, tragedy or comedy?"

"Oh, comedy, please, Mrs Albany; make us laugh."

"*Eh bien*, then I will give you Mark Twain's inimitable 'Buck Fanshaw's Funeral.'"

She began, and in a very few moments

ripples of suppressed laughter ran along from lip to lip like a wave ; it might have been the very men themselves speaking, so perfect was the reader's adoption of each character. The dainty, refined, highflown phrases of the educated minister tripped off her tongue in irresistibly amusing contrast to the strong, rougher, broader American accent, and ceaseless flow of out-west slang. More than once the outburst of laughter compelled a moment's pause, and one lady of high rank whispered to Lady Glen-Luna,—

“It sounds positively absurd to hear all that queer slang from that delicate, high-bred woman. I don't suppose she half knows the English of it all more than we do.”

“Indeed, she can tell us every word, my dear marchioness ; she has been in California, and the other States too. And, if she could not, Douglas could, for he has been all over those regions.”

“Indeed ! well, they must get on well, then. What a memory she has !”

The piece fairly brought down the house, and the moment Gabrielle moved there was but one outcry from the throng that made her pause.

“Something else, please ! don’t stop yet !” and the Marchioness of Danvers said courteously,—

“If you know it, Mrs Albany, I should so like to hear a little fugitive piece, not much known perhaps, of Mrs Barrett Browning’s, called ‘A Woman’s Question.’”

Gabrielle’s dark eyes flashed as she bowed ; right in a line before her stood her false husband beside Jessie Glen-Luna ; did she know he winced under her glance—felt, too, almost afraid of herself lest all her own passionate intensity of feeling should speak too forcibly in the words she uttered even in the very first verse ?

“Do you know that you have asked for the
costliest thing
Ever made by hand above,
A woman’s heart, and a woman’s life,
And a woman’s wonderful love ?”

The tall form was so directly in the reciter's line of vision that it was only natural those dark eyes should rest on it ; the words seemed—to him, at any rate—to be addressed to him, consciously or not ; and yet he could not move, dared not. Was it not to him, and him alone—so guilt read it—that the woman he had so wronged spoke when she came to the lines,—

“ Now stand at the bar of my woman's soul,
Until I shall question thee ? ”

and, with a half step forwards and sternly pointing hand, met and bore down his gaze, which, all shrinking as it was, yet impelled by her very force to gaze again, with the red blood mounting slowly to his swarthy cheek, under the terrible irony that he felt, like cold steel, through all the passion and pathos with which she especially gave the last three verses,—

“ Is your heart an ocean so strong and deep
I may launch my all on its tide ? ”

A loving woman finds heaven or hell
The day she is made a bride.

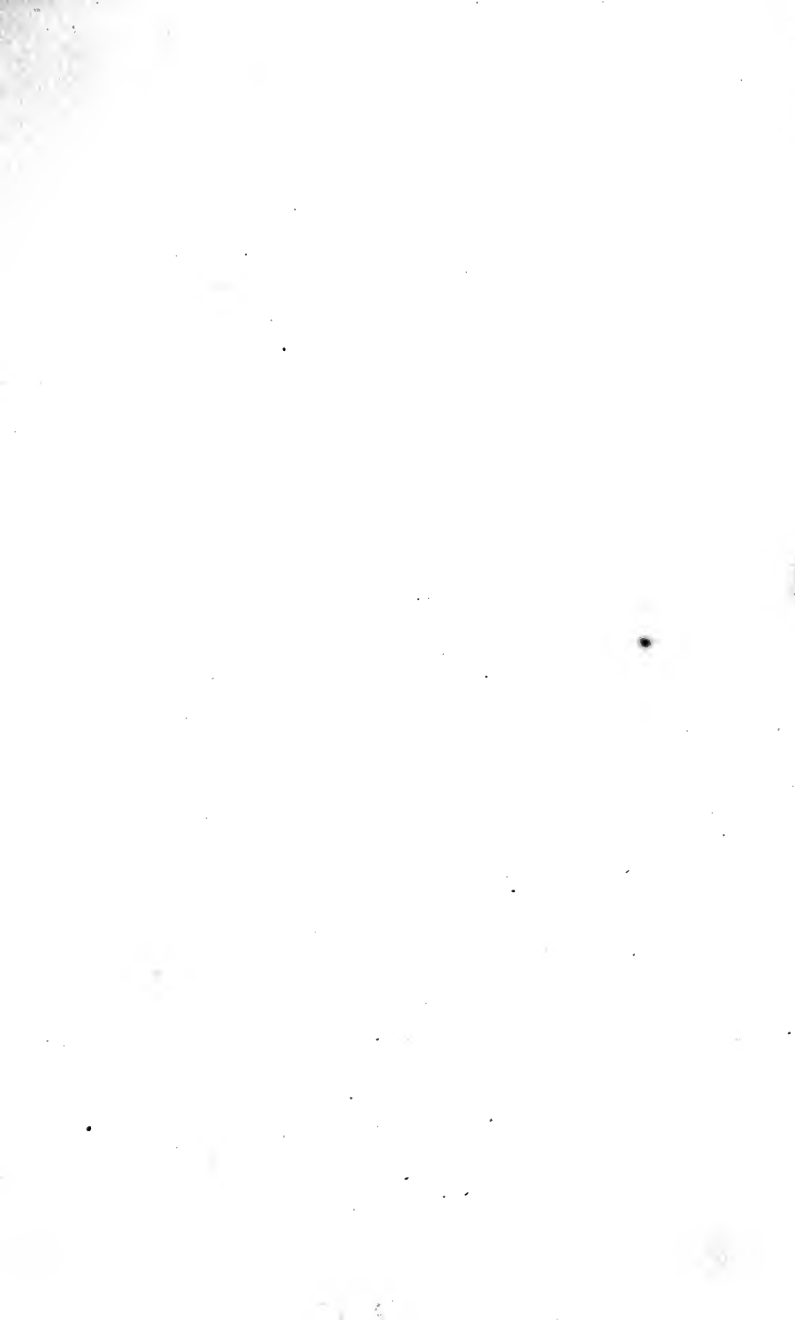
I require all things that are grand and true,
All things that a man should be ;
If you give this all, I would stake my life
To be all you demand of me.

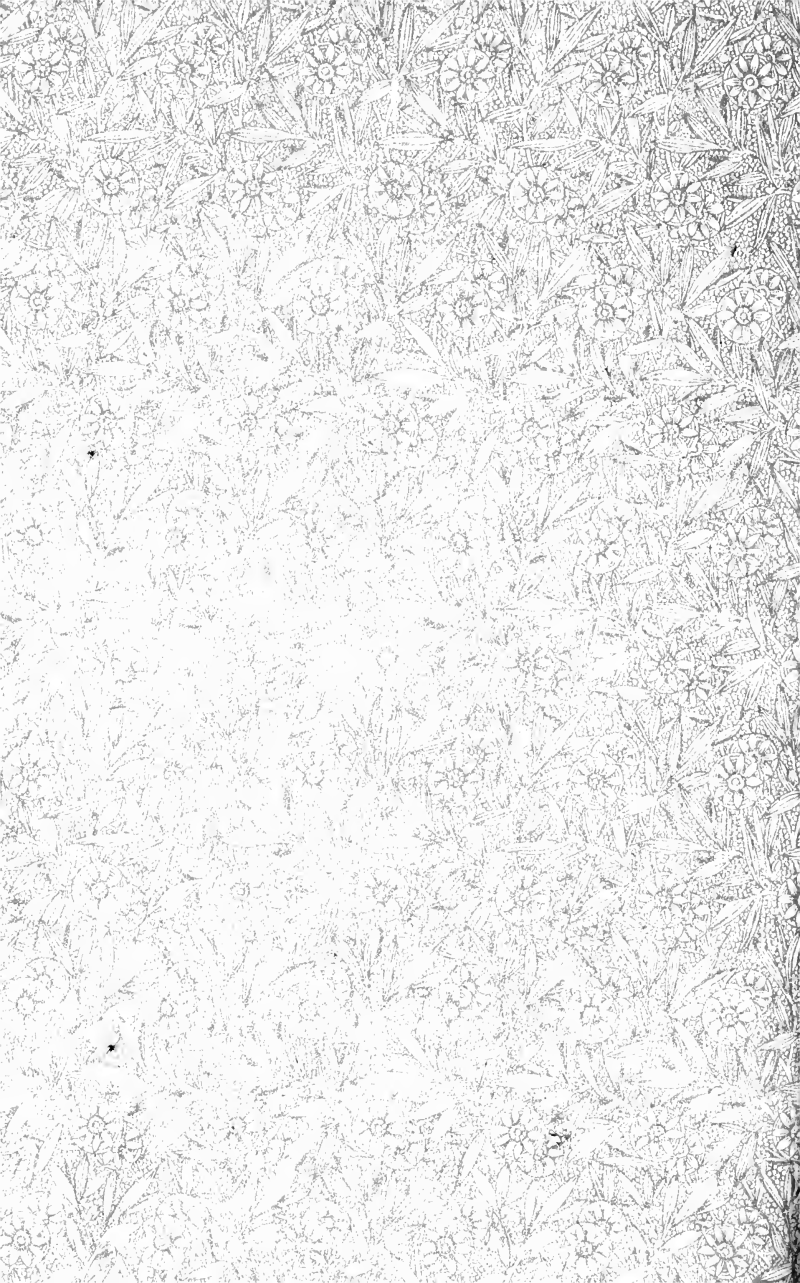
If you cannot do this, a laundress and cook
You can hire, with little to pay ;
But a woman's heart and a woman's life
Are not to be won that way."

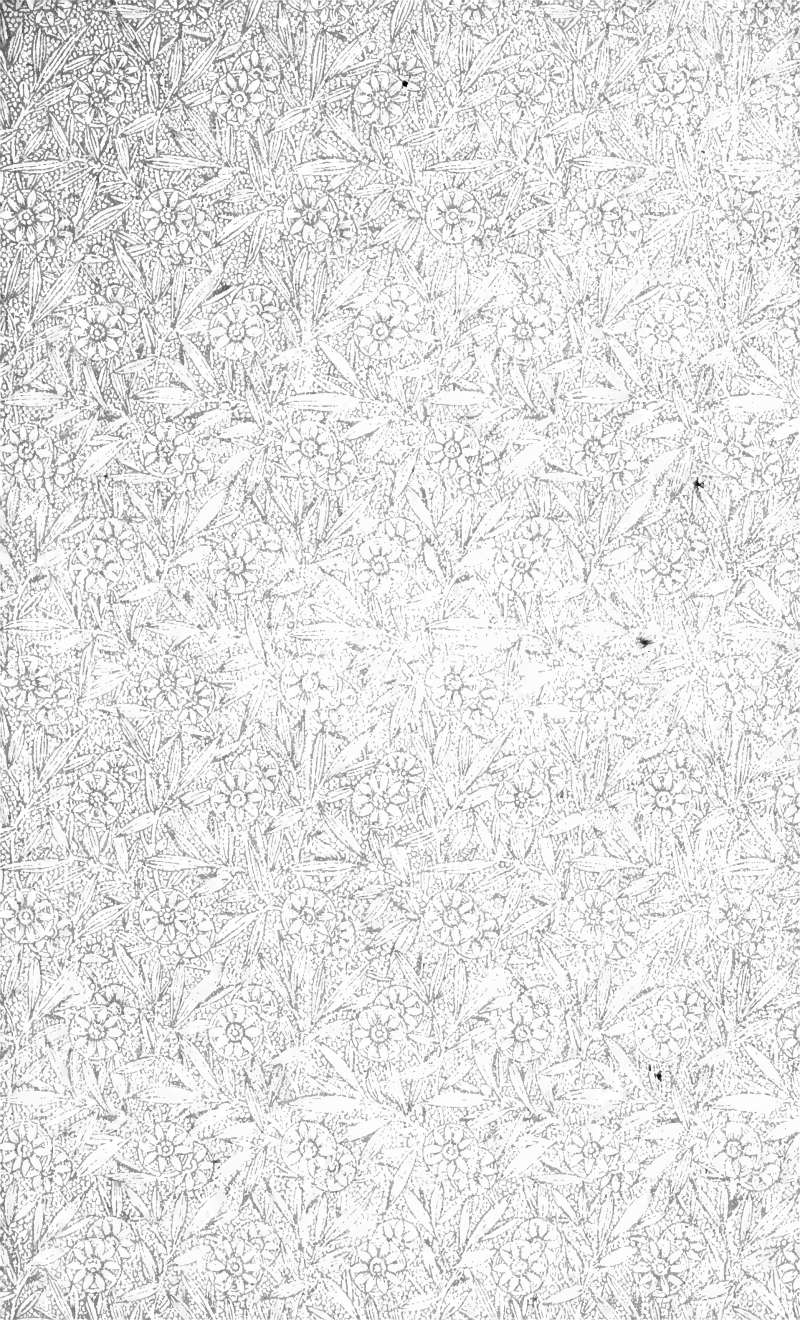
The slender hands dropped, the firm lips closed, the flush died out of the now colourless, statuesque face ; back to their depths, once more suppressed under an iron will, swept the agony and volcano fires of the woman's soul that for a few moments had found some vent ; and, as amidst the applause she drew back to Douglas's side, there came over the man who had made such a wreck—ay, such a hell—of her life a dim, vague sense of something he had lost out of his life—something grand and beautiful—but far beyond him, which that man held by whom she stood.

And with that dim sense came a deeper, fiercer hatred and fear of the wife he had wronged, and the man who had saved his dastard life at the loss of more than life to himself.

END OF VOL. II.







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